
Mass media, 'aesthetic' religion and new empowerments in the postglobal world: religion, politics and new ideological technologies

ABSTRACT

The recent explosions of violence among the Muslim immigrant communities in Europe, from the revolts in the French *banlieus*, to the turmoil related to the "blasphemous" cartoons on the prophet Muhammad and the tough reactions to the theological discourse of Pope Benedict XVI in Regensburg, not to consider the hoary debate about the *hejab* (Islamic veil), give evidence of the crucial role of the union between religion and mass medias in the post-9/11 world, in the definition of the networks of power, and this is particularly true in the case of the "International *jihadism*", whose political use of religious symbolism does not really differ from the "Christian" political use of religion, particularly in contemporary United States and in the post-communist Poland, where the far right-wing melted with the most conservative members of the clergy, spreading, through the new media (particularly the infamous "Radio Maryja") xenophobic messages "in the name of Our Lady", legitimating, at the same time, the actual balances of power.

These episodes, seemingly independent one from the other, clearly represent the epiphany of a widespread, misunderstood, "cultural iconism" that reduces religion to an "aesthetic problem", that is a religious view almost completely skimmed from interior spirituality and from the refinements of the thought, prevalently focused on the exterior, external, that is "aesthetic", aspects of religion, politically manipulated, passed off as the "core" of the religious identity. And, in the "image society", characterised by the social rule of the mass media, the "image" acquires the relevance of a religious dogma. And the role of image in the globalised world is fundamental, also in the definition of the International Relations and in their perception by the public opinion. And this marks the overcoming of the "spatial" dimension of terror and international relations and their transformation into a "global" problem, depending on the power of the new mass media, namely the Internet and the satellite channels.

The aim of my paper is that of analysing, point by point, the evolution (or involution) of religion into an aesthetic problem and its political use, as such as the manipulation of the memory and the "sleep of memory" in the contemporary post-global world.

Dr. Andrea Duranti

PhD candidate

Dipartimento Storico Politico Internazionale
Facoltà di Scienze Politiche
Università degli Studi di Cagliari

duranti.andrea@gmail.com

**Making Sense of a Pluralist World:
Sixth Pan-European Conference on International Relations**

University of Turin, Italy
12-15 September 2007

www.sgir.org

Introduction: a religious renaissance?

Rome, April 2005. People stand shoulder to shoulder on St. Peter's Square. Pope John Paul II has passed away and the colorful crowds, including truant schoolgirls and dudes with dreadlocks – more like fans at a rock concert than churchgoers – have converged on the Vatican to pay their last respects. The flood of visitors has hardly slowed in the year since, but the attraction now is the new Holy Father. Germans in particular are flocking to see 'their' Pope, Benedict XVI, with some 50,000 seeking an audience during his first six months as the leader of the Roman Catholic Church. Are these signs of a religious renaissance in notoriously secular Europe – especially among the young? Or are the multitudes at the Holy See more groupies than true believers – a product of the same media hype that feeds our fixation with soccer icons, pop divas and Hollywood stars? Nobody knows for sure, but one thing is clear. Churches might be emptier than ever, but on a planet that seems to be spinning madly out of control, more and more people are reflecting on the meaning of life – even in the Old World. In the wake of this reawakening, crude Danish caricatures of Mohammed, comments by the Pope in Germany, and an equally controversial production of Mozart's *Idomeneo* in Berlin in recent months have raised questions about how much religion we need and the values it reflects. ... Terrorists ignite bombs in the name of Allah. The White House is occupied by a U.S. president who calls himself a born-again Christian, prays in public, seeks divine guidance on policy matters and wraps his policies up in religious garb. At the dawn of 21st century, religion is strutting onto the world stage as a powerful though volatile actor, playing in an ever-changing range of roles (Traub, 2006: 8).

The failure of the great secular ideologies of the 20th century, from communism to existentialism, to produce an actual improvement in justice and equality, on one hand, and the dramatic socio-political, cultural and economic transformations provoked by globalisation, which is “shattering and undermining the world as we know it, leaving people in a permanent state of anxiety” (Traub, 2006: 12), seems to have proved true Peter Berger's predictions about the “re-enchantment” of the world (1973: 118) as a peculiar feature of postmodernity. The outbreak of religiously justified violence is another characteristic of the age of globalisation, which amplifies the “call to arms” of the new self-proclaimed prophets and gurus from a local to a global, worldly,

dimension thanks to the scattered and ubiquitous mass media networks, so that “in this way, globalization and fundamentalism go together hand in glove” (Traub, 2006: 13).

Nevertheless, drawing on the theories and intuitions of the German-Iranian intellectual Navid Kermani (2007), in my opinion this “religious renaissance” is not a product of a “re-enchantment” of the world, but an ultimate consequence of a Weberian modern “disenchantment”, in its final, “global”, shape, due to the particular features of the phenomenon, inextricably bound to the troubles and possibilities of a globalised and interconnected world (conceiving globalisation as the ultimate form of modernity and capitalism), apart from the traditions of the different faiths, outlining the edges of a unique “epiphany of post-modernity” (Manduchi, 1995: 22; Ahmed, 2004; Gentile, 2006; Sen, 2006). In this paper I will analyse the main features of this phenomenon, trying to define the shape of what I name “religion as an aesthetic problem” and its consequences on national and international security.

Since the end of the ‘80s, concurrently with the fall of the Berlin Wall and of the Soviet Union and the consequent ideological vacuum for Third Worldist intellectuals, the reprise of religious elements in the political lexicon – in Eastern and Western countries as well – marked the affirmation of religion as the strongest (and oldest) ideology and identity reference, in the Muslim world for the millions of orphans of the communist dream, in the West for other millions of people and electors frightened by the *Other* (Muslim immigrants in Europe, international terrorism in the USA). The last decade of the 20th century was marked by the gradual growth of the religious rhetoric and by the unavoidable Manichean simplifications connected to it, which transposed the Cold War dualism into the dialectic of the “clash of civilisations” theorised by the debated scholar Samuel Huntington (1998) that, as pointed out by the Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen, signifies a dangerous univocal classification of “civilizations” in accordance with the sole criteria of religion:

The difficulty with this approach begins with the unique categorization, well before the issue of a clash – or not – is even raised. Indeed, the thesis of a civilizational *clash* is conceptually parasitic on the

commanding power of a unique *categorization* along so-called civilizational lines, which as it happens closely follows religious divisions to which singular attention is paid. ... The alleged confrontations of religious differences are incorporated into a sharp carpentered vision of one dominant and hardened divisiveness. ... This reductionist view is typically combined, I am afraid, with a rather foggy perception of world history which overlooks, first, the extent of *internal* diversities within these civilizational categories, and second, the reach and influence of *interactions* – intellectual as well as material – that go right across the regional borders of so-called civilizations (2006: 10-11).

Huntington's debated theory can be charged with blames of reductionism, superficiality and hidden political aims – due to his connections with the American Republican party – but he was a good example of an actual phenomenon, not the “clash” in itself but the rhetoric use of it by Western conservative politicians and by radical Muslim leaders as well. As evidenced by Navid Kermani, “The Manichean rhetoric of the Western politicians after September 11th, behaves in a dramatically specular way to that of Osama Bin Laden. It is not necessary thinking to Bush's crusade lexicon or to Berlusconi's declarations on the Muslim world's conquest to remember ... that the mechanic and the religious nature of the argumentations are not unknown to the West. When the American President praises the availability of a pupil to ‘give him her dad’, he does an almost identical act to that of the Muslim martyrs' families” (2007: 84-85). And in both of the cases, the political and religious leaders are extremely aware of the huge power of the mass medias in a globalised world in order to manipulate consciences through the “primacy of picture” (Sartori, 2006: XV), in the sense I am going to explain through the analysis of some representative examples of political exploitation of “aesthetic religion” in the age of “video-politics”, which attracted the attention of mass medias and were, in a sense, circularly produced by them, sharing, beyond time and space, some basilar common features.

On February 14th, 1989 ayatollah Khomeini, leader of the Iranian Revolution, few months before his death, cast his infamous *fatwa* against the Anglo-Pakistani writer Salman Rushdie, extending his religious and legal authority to the West, beyond the Muslim world's borders,

breaking forever the secular distinction between *dār al-Islām* (“house of Islam”, where Islam is dominant) and *dār al-hārb* (literally “house of the war”, where Islam is a condition of minority and not juridically binding) and inaugurating – “officially” – the age of globalised Islamic radicalism, characterised by the attentive use of mass medias and the instantaneous retransmission at the four corners of the earth of an incitation to violence in the name of religion.

On September 11th, 2001 a commando of 19 terrorists hijacked four passenger planes and crashed two of them on the Twin Towers in New York City and one on the Pentagon in Washington. The hijackers acted in the name of their faith in political Islam against an “enemy which has become an abstraction, against a superior power which could be termed metaphysical”, staging the attacks “as a media event for an audience of billions, including the ten minute pause during which the cameras could be set up. That wasn’t thought up by Afghan tribal warriors, but by people who are themselves part of the contemporary world which they are fighting” (Kermani, 2002).

In another scenario, on November 2nd, 2004, Mohammad Bouyeri, an apparently well integrated Dutch citizen of Moroccan origins, murdered, in the centre of Amsterdam, the controversial film director Theo van Gogh, author, with Ayaan Hirsi Ali, of the short movie *Submission – Part I*, a very critical *j’accuse* against women’s condition in Muslim societies. The killing opened in the Netherlands a harsh debate on Muslim immigrants integration and on the freedom of speech.

Since January 2006 the Muslim world was shocked and bathed in blood by the republication of a series of 12 satirical cartoons on the Prophet Muhammad on the Danish newspaper “Jyllands-Posten”, which opened the so called “Muhammad cartoons controversy”. Violent turmoil occurred either in Muslim countries and in the “European medinas”, provoking contradictory diplomatic reactions by Arab governments and religious leaders; the Catholic Church expressed support to the Muslim “brothers” and blame towards the Western – “blasphemous” – freedom of expression. Few months later, on May 2006, the release of the movie “The Da Vinci Code” provoked tough

reactions and boycotts all over the Catholic world, questioning again the freedom of expression on religious matters and evidencing again the power of mass medias in fomenting disinformation and sensationalism, without consideration, in this case, to the fictional nature of the movie and of the homonymous book.

1. The religious (identitary) element.

Behind the episodes of mass turmoil or behind the catastrophe of 9/11 usually lays a pretended religious element which frequently veils political aims or the expression of a social or economic uneasiness. In the cited cases, almost all related (at least in the phase of mass protests) with “Euro-Islam”, religion represents an identitary shield for deprived or marginalised people, even for the second and third generations of immigrants that, as pointed out by Ian Buruma in his essay on Theo Van Gogh’s murder (2006: 187-231), despite their remarkable efforts to integrate themselves in the country where they were born, are often victims of social alienation and bitter delusions, being considered as *the Other* by the host society and becoming trapped by a kind of “labelling theory”¹, finding refuge in what is conceived, either by Westerners and by them, as the fundamental trait of their identity, that is Muslim religion. Amartya Sen, as already mentioned, is very critical of the dangerousness of this sharp identification between Arabs (or Persians, Turks, etc.) and Islam – generally in its more conservative interpretation – because, on one hand, identitary reductionism neglects the plural identities of every human being – “People see themselves ... in many different ways. For example, a Bangladeshi Muslim is not only a Muslim but also a Bengali and a Bangladeshi, typically quite proud of the Bengali language, literature, and music, not to mention the other identities he or she may have connected with class, gender, occupation, politics, aesthetic taste, and so on” (Sen, 2006: 15) – while, on the other hand, it attempts to suppress them at all: “It is, of course, not surprising at all that the champions of Islamic fundamentalism would like

¹ “Labelling theory” is a sociological theory which attributes deviance to the attribution, by society, of a social role to individuals, with definite characteristics and expected behaviours. Howard Saul Becker, one of the main theorists, wrote that “deviance is not a quality of the act the person commits, but rather a consequence of the application by others of rules and sanctions to an offender. The deviant is one to whom that label has successfully been applied; deviant behavior is behavior that people so label” (1963: 9).

to suppress all other identities of Muslims in favor of being only Islamic. But it is extremely odd that those who want to overcome the tensions and conflicts linked with Islamic fundamentalism also seem unable to see Muslim people in any form other than their being just Islamic, which is combined with attempts to redefine Islam, rather than seeing the many-dimensional nature of diverse human beings who happen to be Muslim” (Sen, 2006: 14-15).

The problem has two faces: one related to some Westerners, the “labellers” according to “labelling theory”, who attributing the label of “Islamic” and a series of expected behaviours to “Muslims” tend to discriminate and marginalise them on the base of prejudices, keeping them to the borders of the host society, fearing cultural and social differences and not caring of the integration desire and attempts of many immigrants; on the other hand, marginalised Muslims will be more inclined (of course not deterministically) to retire themselves in their own community, a close (and considered as “safe”) environment that favours the superimposition of homesickness, religion and tradition, merged together into a stark identity, laden with iconism and a simplified and “aesthetic” conception of religion, focused on sacralised symbolisms, charged with the dignity and identitary sense of a whole people, echoing the very birth of political Islam, dating back to the age of anti-colonial struggles, when the “faith of the fathers” became one of the roots of Arab nationalism (Tibi, 1997) against the Western colonizers, raising the paradigmatic and hoary intellectual debate that counters modernity (and West) against Islam.

In the case of Euro-Islam the “labelling” surfaces also in the transformation of the urban structure of European cities, expression of different models of integration (or not integration) adopted by governments at the beginning of the migratory phenomenon. The Italian sociologist Stefano Allievi states that the urban geography of Euro-Islam developed according to two models, the “concentrated” and the “diffuse” ones (Allievi 2005, 123-124). The former characterises the countries with a longer history of migrations, namely Central and Northern Europe, where the immigrants’ communities settled in large industrial centres, gathered in “ethnic” neighbourhoods (the so called “Muslimtowns”), sometimes real ghettos, where the problem of immigration and

Islam merged with the wider problem of urban and suburban decay, producing the progressive emergence of marginalization and unemployment troubles among the second and third generations, that mastered the new country's language and culture, but are often put aside by strongly competitive education systems and job markets, frequently dominated by racist prejudices. These conditions have produced the reinforcement of intracommunitarian relations and the seclusion from "Western" society, the creation of "cities within the cities" and have prepared a fertile field for the spreading of radical Islam as the last and most powerful "Third Worldist" ideology, point of reference of the Muslim outcasts in Europe and elsewhere, in the French *banlieus* just like in the Palestinian refugee camps. The "concentrated" model may be found in cities with high percentages of Muslim immigrants, with ethnically homogeneous communities. Exemplary cases are those of France, Great Britain and Germany. The Muslim presence in the first two countries is strictly related to the colonial heritage, with predominant communities, respectively, of Maghrebians and Indo-Pakistanis, while in the German case the invitation by the West Germany's government was induced by the historical Turkish-German political and economical relations. Examples of "Muslimtowns" are: Bruxelles and Berlin (more than 10% of the whole population), Cologne and Birmingham (5-10%), Bradford (the so called "British Islamabad") and the French *banlieus*. The "diffuse" model, on the other hand, is peculiar of another cycle of Muslim migrations, begun later and focused on the Southern Europe (Italy and Spain); this type of settlement is even more characterised by plurality, with a higher ethnic heterogeneity and by a jeopardizing of the Muslim presence, shed within the cities.

According to the European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia (EUMC) 2006 report, Muslim immigrants in Europe often face very tough situations for what concerns housings (poorer and more frequently situated in decayed areas, spatially segregated, than the rest of population), discrimination, exclusionary and Islamophobic violence, worsened during and after every terrorist or violent act involving Muslims in Europe or abroad charged with meaning by the mass medias.

On this respect, the Moroccan sociologist Fatima Mernissi, during an interview (Louassini and Mernissi), remarked that Islam is often reduced to a religion, neglecting the fact that it is also a culture, and a juridical system as well, and that it can be interpreted in a variety of ways, either as a civilization of dialogue (*adab*) or as an instrument of identity in its static and conservative meaning, namely idealised and therefore unreal, religion that becomes monopolising (political) ideology which struggles against every kind of non-conformity.

2. Violation of the religious element (“blasphemy”).

“Blasphemy means speaking evil of sacred matters. Where organized religion exists, blasphemy is taboo ... every religious society will punish the rejection or reviling of its gods. Because blasphemy is an intolerable profanation of the sacred, it affronts the priestly class, the deep-seated beliefs of worshippers, and the basic values that a community shares. Punishing the blasphemer may serve any one of several social purposes in addition to setting an example to warn others. ... Public retribution for blasphemy also vindicates the witness of the believers and especially of the priests; it reaffirms communal norms; and it avoids the snares of toleration” (Levy, 1993: 3).

Salman Rushdie was charged by Khomeini with “blasphemy” for his novel “The Satanic Verses”. The hijackers of 9/11 acted with the aim of punishing with a bloody political act the occupiers of the *dār al-Islām*, persecutors of Muslims, claiming *jihād* (in its sense of “holy war”) against America and the whole blasphemous West. Theo Van Gogh was killed for his “blasphemous” movie *Submission – Part I*, which shows, on female naked bodies, the Koranic verses related to slashes condemnations for adulterous women and Ayaan Hirsi Ali was forced to go in hiding with an escort and then to leave the Netherlands due to the political consequences of the murder. Not to mention the “blasphemy affair” par excellence, the 12 satirical cartoons most of which depicting the Prophet Muhammad in a laughable way, or the infamous Regensburg lecture of Pope Benedict XVI, when was quoted a sentence of the Byzantine emperor Manuel II Paleologus,

who had defined Islam as “evil and inhuman”², or the “blasphemous” plot of the Da Vinci Code. In all these cases there was a wide community (local or global) that *perceived* something as offensive (blasphemous) for its religious identitary reference. It is fundamental pointing out the importance of this reference for marginalised individuals. In her essay on Arab medias, globalisation and democracy, Fatima Mernissi wrote that Mina, a textile worker unfairly fired from her job, was left “without rights and without money, but she had not forfeited her humanity; she could talk to Heaven and its Master. Islam gives someone like Mina a framework within which to express her pain and to change it into anger and a program for vengeance. ... As the sole symbolic heritage of millions of the disinherited, Islam is called on to play an important role as their identifying referent, while they await their entry into the field of modern knowledge” (Mernissi, 2002: 58-59). Therefore, it is sufficient the perception of the offensiveness of a declaration, an artwork or even a political situation to rise “the rage and the pride” of a community, which often does not have a clear and complete knowledge of the real content of the blasphemous item, but acts driven by a simplified and misrepresented mass media report.

3. Media amplification of the violation, the primacy of image and the “homo videns”.

In all of our cases of study, a pivotal role in the formation of mass protests was played by mass medias in a post-global context. In his essay *Homo videns*, Giovanni Sartori theorised the “genetic mutation” of the homo sapiens into the so called *homo videns* (“seeing / watching man”), produced by the television “primacy of picture” which is gradually eroding the nature of human beings as “symbolic animals” (Cassirer, 1948: 47-49), able to abstract and reasoning through the use of words and rationality. Sartori states that the “televviewer is more a *watching* animal than a symbolic animal. For him things depicted by pictures are far more important than things expressed by words” (2006: 8) and that “the watching is atrophying the understanding” (2006: 27), heavily

² “Show me just what Mohammed brought that was new, and there you will find things only evil and inhuman, such as his command to spread by the sword the faith he preached”. The text of the lecture is available on the Vatican’s website: http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2006/september/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20060912_university-regensburg_en.html.

affecting the perceptions of social reality (Shanahan and Morgan, 1999) and establishing the authority of picture: “It does not matter that images can deceive even more than words. ... The point is that the eye believes in what it see, and therefore the most reliable cognitive authority is what is seen. What is seen / watched looks like ‘real’, that is to say true” (Sartori, 2006: 45-46). As remarked by Sartori, television is creating a “videocracy” in the sense that it is producing a heterodirected (manipulated) audience: television is no more the mouthpiece of public opinion, because the latter is just the *echo* of its own voice (Sartori, 2006: 46).

Moreover, television information is subjected to certain rules which invalidate a clear and complete comprehension of the news by the viewers. First and foremost, television must create “media events” to attract audience’s attention and this means that only the most spectacular and dramatic events, rich of “pathos”, will be shown on the screen, excluding a great number of less impressive events; on this regard, Fatima Mernissi said during an interview: “What is the problem of television ... of all the televisions? That only violence is news, Bin Laden is a big news, but an Arab thinker like for example Al Jabiri ... is not known by you. Why? Because he is not a ‘big news’, because he does not defend violence” (Minerva and Mernissi).

Mernissi wrote in *Islam and Democracy* that “television cannot show complexities; it elects a detail, which becomes enormous and takes over the whole screen” (2002: 23). The details of violence (the “big news”) or provocation, extrapolated from their own contexts and with no in-depth analysis of the actual contents or facts, are infinitely magnified by mass medias and instantaneously retransmitted everywhere, gliding down on the “dish cities” (Buruma, 2006: 21) in the European peripheries and elsewhere, inducing viewers to perceive as “blaspheme” any supposed aggression to their “symbolic heritage”.

Globalisation and satellite televisions, on the other hand, enable a “casus belli” occurred locally, within a particular context, to become global. Gilles Kepel states that Salman Rushdie was a victim of the leadership conflict on the Muslim world underway at the end of the ‘80s between Saudi Arabia and the Islamic Republic of Iran:

The fatwa was above all a move to regain the initiative. With it, Khomeini gave expression to the deep outrage of many Muslims over a book that they viewed as an affront to their honor, religion, and culture. His bold action contrasted strongly with the powerlessness of Riyadh and its international networks to prevent the book's publication. A further effect of the fatwa of February 14 was to shift the focus of Islamic opposition from southwest Asia and into the heart of Western Europe - which was outside the traditional borders of the faith - where Salman Rushdie lived as a British subject. At a stroke, *dar el-Islam* was made universal, and its politics was expanded to include Muslim immigrants to the West, who became first the hostages and then the actors in a worldwide struggle for control of Islam. In the decade that followed, the West was to become a new battlefield for these contending forces (Kepel, 2006: 185).

The infamous *fatwa* acted like a dagger oozing out from radios and televisions all over the world. The book was burned in many countries and several people connected with it (namely the Italian and Japanese translator and the Swedish publisher) were severely injured, while Rushdie was obliged to go in hiding for the following nine years. A political regional conflict, in name of the defence of religion, had become a global turmoil due to media coverage and emulative effect. Muhammad cartoons controversy could have been limited to Danish Muslim communities, but the media rebounding caused bloody manifestations, damages, injuries and deaths from Europe to Indonesia and even car bombings against Christian churches in Iraq and the murder of an Italian Catholic priest in Turkey. A Catholic nun was killed in Somalia by Muslim terrorists after Benedict XVI's lecture in Regensburg.

These “epiphenomena of postmodernity” (Manduchi, 1995: 22; Ahmed, 2004) are inextricably connected to the post-global age on different respects. While the capillarity of (a deformed and selective) information has been already mentioned as *the* peculiar feature of globalisation, on the other hand the substitution of the “abstract language” with a “perceptive language” (Sartori, 2006: 23) and the primacy of “image” even in Muslim contexts seem to be unexpected external effects of globalisation itself.

The affirmation of a new kind of media “iconolatry” supported by the international networks, while on one hand consecrates as *the Truth* (“*aletheia*”) the television opinion (“*doxa*”) strengthened by the irrefutable evidence of images³ – paraphrasing the Kantian lexicon we may define it as the affirmation of “Phaenomenon” (what appears) on “Noumenon” (reality) – on the other hand it seems to re-echo the medieval complex symbologies and the cult of icons (*eikona*, “images”), word from which derives the concept of “iconism”, in this case a *cultural* iconism, in terms either of a crystallisation of consolidated cultural clichés and in terms of reduction of religion to the defence of identitary symbols of particular emotive impact. Besides from the defence of religious emblems like veils, crosses, dress codes, the figure of the Prophet on the “blasphemous” cartoons perceived as an attack to the same core of religion, the “iconolatry” involves also, and more relevantly, the emotive appeal of the American telepreachers and of the video messages of the leaders of Al-Qaeda, both of them united by the attentive creation of a media event, that is to say, as remarked by Navid Kermani, a modern and absolutely *secular* phenomenon, aimed to manipulate a post-modern and “telly-addicted” audience, reducing religion to what I call an “aesthetic problem”, hollowing faith, images and symbols of their deepest and authentic meaning and transforming them into empty semantic items to be filled with rhetoric for the private use of socially and politically frustrated masses. It is necessary at this point remarking that the cult of “icons” (*latu sensu*) is by definition extraneous to Islam (a religion historically based on iconoclasm) and that this “iconic” cultural contamination is a direct product of media globalisation, which extended until the borders of the desert the “primacy of picture”. It is a long-term consequence of the “revolution of modernity” that broke in the Muslim world with the cannons of Napoleon Bonaparte during the Egyptian Campaign (1798-1801), a historical paradox considering that in the European “Dark Ages” it was the Muslim world to preserve the classic works and to create the culture and the scientific knowledge which, transmitted by osmosis to the Christian Europe, would have created the

³ It is important to remark that journalism in the age of globalisation, despite the instantaneity of the news transmission, has lost its reliability exactly for its rapidity that simplifies the facts, cuts the costs reducing the number of correspondents (who tends to stay within the same hotels or press rooms), relying on few press agencies and standardising and impoverishing the news.

basis for Renaissance and modernity. The colonial age and the ideal superimposition of modern world and colonizer West opened a bicentenary debate on modernity among Muslim intellectuals which has fuelled the anti-Western rhetoric of the global age. The “sleep of memory” (Spinelli, 2001) has made lose the awareness on one hand, of the actual strict cultural interconnections between West and Muslim world and, on the other hand, of the authentic meaning of religious semiotic.

As remarked by Gilles Kepel in his essay *The War for Muslim Minds* (2004), political Islam has undertaken the task of “waging a war for the hearts and minds of Muslims ... to strengthen its grip on co-religionists and to enlist them in establishing an ‘Islamic State’ through armed struggle” (2), and globalisation has provided to radical Islam as well to the American Christian Right a “technology-packed arsenal” (Weingarten, 2006: 46) to affirm the theory of the “clash of civilisations” through the manipulation of images and information. Audience’s reaction to blasphemy and “call to arms” varies in accordance with some objective (i.e. environment, social class, etc.) and subjective (i.e. personal approach to the faith) variables, creating a plurality of approaches to the problem, and a sort of pyramidal hierarchy with two steps: at the bottom stand the masses, in Europe and elsewhere in the Muslim world, which react to the stimulations of the mass medias and of the Islamic clergy through square riots, while the upper step is contemporarily occupied by the middle classes and by the *a’imma* (pl. of *imām*), as, in contemporary Islam, they share the position of “think tank” of radicalism; in the case of Al-Qaeda and of the hijackers of 9/11 none of them has a formally recognised religious authority, as they are, in the most of the cases, former middle and upper class men, usually with a westernised and secular background, often apparently well integrated in Western societies (just like many of the hijackers, who lived a well-off life in Hamburg) whose biography was marked by the experience of conversion (Kermani, 2007: 58-59). As regards the *a’imma* and the spreading of radicalism in Europe, a net distinction should be made between the leaders of the great Mosques and cultural centres, tightly controlled by the great international financiers, focuses of wider international struggles for “Muslim minds” – as, i.e.,

in the case of the Great Mosque of Rome, claimed by Morocco and Saudi Arabia (see Gritti and Allam, 2001) – and the local *a'imma*, leaders of the minor centres, who are often (albeit not always), as pointed out by Khaled Fouad Allam (who has proposed the institution of an Italian registry of nationally authorised *a'imma*, under the control of the Ministry of Education), enriched shop-keepers without a regular education as religious guides and therefore more sensible to radical drifts, fomenting hatred towards the West among their own community, transforming the Friday sermons in political proclamations with heavy social consequences, echoing what is happening in the Catholic Poland ruled by the allegiance between the Kaczyński twins and the controversial radio station Radio Maryja. On this regard the German journalist Jan Puhl wrote:

Even today, priests use the pulpit to endorse political candidates in the runups to elections. In 1997 some segments of the clergy portrayed the referendum on the new constitution as a showdown between 'neo-heathenism and Stalinism.' ... The sharpest rhetorical razor was wielded by 'Radio Maryja.' Father Tadeusz Rydzyk runs his empire in Toruń like a gated community ... the reverend capitalizes on the fruits of globalization to get his nationalistic message across to an audience of some 3 million. The Redemptorist priest set up his station almost 15 years ago. Radio Maryja broadcasts an exotic cocktail of self-help tips, mournful hymns and the occasional anti-Semitic theory. ... Warsaw's new fraternal rulers, Lech and Jaroslaw Kaczyński, have embraced the station's propaganda potential. During the election campaign, Jaroslaw – today's prime minister – frequently took the stump before the mikes in Toruń. There were no limits on broadcast time, and no piercing questions to interrupt the flow. (2006: 57).

The impact of “aesthetic religion” on International Relations is quite clear as it is tightly connected, on one hand, with the International jihadism and, on the other hand, on the crusade lexicon and rhetoric of the American “neo-cons”, with some remarkable ramifications in the post-communist Eastern Europe, where the religious rebirth was merged with the emergence of violent anti-European and xenophobic movements (particularly anti-Semite and homophobic ones) which found in the nationalist “Christian roots” a moral justification (Mudde, 2005). Politics and faith rhetorically merged together and served by mass medias with a scent of antiquity. This is “aesthetic

religion”, a postmodern and postglobal phenomenon that has not much to do with the “re-enchantment of the world”, but much more with international politics, balances of power and unequal social conditions, with unpredictable consequences in the next future but its growth.

WORKS CITED

- Ahmed, Akbar S. Postmodernism And Islam: Predicament And Promise. London: Routledge, 2004.
- Ilievi, Stefano. Musulmani d'Occidente. Roma: Carocci Editore, 2005.
- Becker, Howard S. Outsiders: Studies in the Sociology of Deviance. New York: The Free Press, 1963.
- Berger, Peter L. The Social Reality of Religion. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1973.
- Buruma, Ian. Murder in Amsterdam. The Death of Theo Van Gogh and the Limits of Tolerance. New York: Penguin Press, 2006.
- Cassirer, Ernst. Saggio sull'uomo. Milano: Longanesi, 1948.
- Gentile, Emilio. La democrazia di Dio: La religione americana nell'era dell'impero e del terrore. Roma-Bari: Laterza, 2006.
- Gritti, Roberto and Allam, Magdi. Islam, Italia: Chi sono e cosa pensano i musulmani che vivono tra noi. Milano: Guerini, 2001.
- Huntington, Samuel. The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998.
- Kepel, Gilles. Jihād: The Trail of Political Islam. London: I.B. Tauris, 2006.
- Kermani, Navid. "Roots of terror: suicide, martyrdom, self-redemption and Islam." Open Democracy 21 February 2002. 21 August 2007. <http://www.opendemocracy.net/faith-europe_islam/article_88.jsp>.
- Kermani, Navid. Dinamite dello Spirito: Martirio, Islam e nichilismo. Desio: Aquilegia, 2007. Italian ed. of Dynamit des Geistes: Martyrium, Islam und Nihilismus. Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2002, translated by Andrea Duranti and Matteo Tuveri.
- Levy, Leonard Williams. Blasphemy: Verbal Offense Against the Sacred, from Moses to Salman Rushdie. Chapel Hill (NC): University of North Carolina Press, 1993.

Louassini, Zouhir and Mernissi, Fatima. "Fatima Mernissi." Rainews24. 14 October 2004. 24 August 2007. <<http://www.rainews24.it/ran24/rubriche/incontri/video/FatimaMernissi2004.wmv>>.

Manduchi, Patrizia. La collera di Allah: Il radicalismo islamico contemporaneo: attivismo politico ed elaborazione teorica. Cagliari: Orientalia Karalitana (serie monografica): 1995.

Mernissi, Fatima. Islam and democracy. Fear of the modern world. Cambridge (MA): Perseus Publishing, 2002.

Minerva, Luciano and Mernissi, Fatima. "Fatema Mernissi: il confine è sempre violenza." Rainews24. 2001. 24 August 2007. <http://www.rainews24.it/ran24/rubriche/incontri/interviste/mernissi_intervista.asp>.

Mudde, Cas. Racist Extremism in Central and Eastern Europe. New York: Routledge, 2005.

Puhl, Jan. "The Battle for Souls." Spiegel Special (International Edition) 9/2006: 56-57.

Sartori, Giovanni. Homo videns: Televisione e post-pensiero. Roma-Bari: Laterza, 2006. Translation from Italina by Author.

Sen, Amartya. Identity and Violence. The Illusion of Destiny. New York-London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006.

Shanahan, James and Morgan, Michael. Television and Its Viewers: Cultivation Theory and Research. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.

Spinelli, Barbara. Il sonno della memoria: L'Europa dei totalitarismi. Milano: Mondadori, 2001.

Tibi, Bassam. Arab Nationalism: Between Islam and the Nation-state. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997.

Traub, Rainer. "Religion, Born Again." Spiegel Special (International Edition) 9/2006: 6-15.

Weingarten, Susanne. "Karaoke for the Lord". Spiegel Special (International Edition) 9/2006: 42-47.