



A CONVERSATION WITH PAOLO BRANCA ON ITALY, ISLAM, AND INTEGRATION

Interview by Giacomo Maria Arrigo

Paolo Branca is Professor of Islamic Studies and Arab Language at the Catholic University of Milan. He is member of *theSquare* advisory board.

The media clamor caused by the great terrorist attacks of the past years has now diminished and almost disappeared. The same attacks seem to have diminished drastically. Is this a sign that the jihadist psychosis of al-Qaeda and ISIS is fading?

Unfortunately not. The relative disintegration of these groups leaves the field to the so-called 'lone wolves', who are, in some ways, even more insidious because they are unpredictable and more difficult to prevent, especially in open and therefore non-militarized societies.

Integration is undoubtedly a certain, albeit slow, method of absorbing the burden of resentment that some immigrant subjects could cultivate. In short, radicalization is born (not



only but also) from experiences of exclusion, which could be prevented by a solid and welcoming social network.

A hospitable and open social network does exist, indeed: it deals with emergencies such as a meal, a bed, clothes and medicines... However, if we don't take care of the regularization of the migrants through official employments that are guaranteed at least from the point of view of social security and accident prevention, we pass in the immense grey area of the so-called "caporalato" (illegal recruitment) and marginalization, which can also be an incubator of resentment. Nonetheless, it does not seem to me that in Italy there has ever been a shift from this situation to terrorist acts, whereas the situation in the French suburbs is quite different.

Do you agree with the term "integration"? Or would it be better to use other terms such as "inclusion" or "hospitality"?

I would prefer 'interaction'. In fact, if you think, for example, that in the thousand Milanese oratories, 25% of the users are Muslim boys and girls, but it doesn't make headlines, and it is as if it did not make any difference. Proof of this is the fact that every year at Christmas we read pages and pages of newspapers about some bizarre teacher who decides not to represent the nativity scene at school with the excuse of respect for Islam—which, by the way, celebrates the virgin conception of Mary and the birth of Jesus (prophet, not son of God) even in the Koran.

Where are we in terms of integration? I am referring to the Italian picture. I do not know that the Italians are a racist or intrinsically intolerant people, but sometimes the tones rise a little too much.

It's a recent drift that corresponds to a barbarization of political communication everywhere: leaders like Trump and his Western but also Eastern counterparts (see Erdogan) have legitimized an



aggressive if not brutal language that would not have been imaginable in the past years. When I was a boy, the Rai (national public broadcasting company of Italy) programs forbade the use of the term 'feet', suggesting to prefer 'extremities'. From this point of view, we have definitely worsened.

The "tortellino dell'accoglienza" with chicken meat instead of the classic pork filling has become [a national case](#)—a proof that you should not touch the food to the Italians. But it also reveals that there are resistance to peaceful coexistence. Is that so?

Mother's food, like the team of the heart, are the last bastions on which those who no longer have an identity, and for this reason are afraid of any 'diversity'. A rearguard battle that exacerbates the tones without adding any sensible and useful content to anything.

"Culinary coexistence" is certainly insignificant compared to religious coexistence, that is to say, the cohabitation of several (often conflicting) spiritual options. What do you think of the possibility of this more serious "spiritual coexistence"? Is it possible to implement it and base it on shared values, giving rise to a solid and lasting social bond?

The so-called interreligious dialogue can only be a tune between people who have a genuine experience of spirituality, that is, who seriously ask questions about the meaning of existence. Discussing doctrines and precepts is like arguing about the shape and the material of a bottle without worrying about what it contains. I think Cardinal Carlo Maria Martini was right when he said that the world is not divided between believers and non-believers, but between thinkers and nonthinkers.

Does the substratum of "weak thought" that permeates the whole of Western culture (relativism, hedonism and, in part, nihilism) favor or impede this spiritual coexistence?



Those who have only an earthly horizon are not said to despise those who instead look to the Other and to the Beyond. Often agnostics ask us uncomfortable questions and we must be grateful to them, if they do so in good faith. But even those who are 'too' religious and devalue earthly realities have major problems. As usual, we return to the common sense of the ancients who preached 'the unsolvable problems.