

COUNTRIES AND CULTURES OF THE WORLD

Arabs

THEIR VOICES AND
LIVED EXPERIENCES



GRÉGOIRE GRIGNON

EDITOR

NOVA

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CONTENTS

Preface		vii
Chapter 1	Arab Renewal and Religious Reform: An Essay <i>Ziad Hafez</i>	1
Chapter 2	Voices and Experiences of Libyans in the Post-Arab Spring Period <i>Yulia Krylova</i>	77
Chapter 3	Democracy and Pluralism in the Discursive Traditions of the Tunisian Islamic Movement <i>Domenico Copertino</i>	99
Index		121

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Chapter 3

**DEMOCRACY AND PLURALISM IN THE
DISCURSIVE TRADITIONS OF THE
TUNISIAN ISLAMIC MOVEMENT**

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ABSTRACT

In this paper I discuss from the anthropological perspective the discursive practices of the Tunisian Islamic movement about democracy and pluralism. In the Islamic discourse, such 'ideascapes' (Appadurai 1996) are part of a wider discussion, whose subject is the specificity of Tunisian Islamic modernity. People I carried out my research with are *da'wa* activists, whose aim is spreading pious lifestyles and reasoning methods, and Islamists (intellectuals and militants), engaged in the democratic reconstruction of the post-revolution State. The practical and theoretical elaboration of the ideascapes of democracy and pluralism, carried out by these subjects, is part of the contemporary Islamic discursive traditions.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter is based on an ethnographic field research pursued by the author in Tunisia in 2013-15. It deals anthropologically with the discursive practices developed by the Tunisian Islamic movement about democracy and pluralism. In the Islamic discourse – in Foucauldian terms – these themes are part of a wider project whose issue is the specific form of Tunisian Islamic modernity. People with whom the research was pursued are on the one side the activists of contemporary *da'wa*, engaged in spreading throughout society the lifestyles and reasoning methods focused on piety; on the other side, they are the Islamic militants and intellectuals engaged directly in the democratic reconstruction of the country after the 2010-11 Revolution. The practical and theoretical elaboration of the concepts of democracy and pluralism, carried on by these subjects, is part of contemporary Islamic discursive traditions.

The main theoretical works in the field of anthropology of Islam (Gellner 1981, Asad 1986, Gilsenan 2000) overlook Islamic social and political activism. This is probably due to the traditional distinction between Middle Eastern anthropology and political studies about the same area. Yet Western and Middle Eastern political ideascapes (Appadurai 1996) about the Islamic world – e.g., Islamism, Salafism, zaidism, caliphate, sultanic power, Arab exception, procedural/integral secularism, and the like – circulate in the public sphere and become part of the public discourse and popular culture. This way, they enter the vocabulary of common people, the subject of anthropological interest. In particular, in Tunisia the public discourse about Islam is part of the practices and debates of those sectors of civil society that shape contemporary *da'wa*. The political-anthropological approach to Islam analyses the development of political institutions with reference to Islamic texts – the Coran, the *Hadith* and the traditional Islamic juridical and political studies – trying to understand how Muslims transform such texts into patterns of behavior and social organizations suitable for specific contexts.

I followed the activities of one *da'wa* association called *rabata ash-Shabab ar-Rissali* (league of the Young Messengers). *Da'wa* associations,

forbidden or strictly controlled during the regime of Zin el-Abidine Ben-Ali, flourished after the 2010-11 Revolution and the subsequent democratic opening. The youth I worked with were active in the *da'wa*, meaning in the narrow sense the invitation to non-practicing Muslims to pray, and – broadly speaking – the diffusion of culture, education, and knowledge of Islam and of the history of Islamic thought and civilization. The members of the *rabata* were mostly young professionals and students (the age limit according to the association's statute is 35), offspring of Tunis middle-classes. I spent much time conversing with some of them, such as young *du'at* (*da'wa* activists, sing. *du'ai*) Yahia – studying engineering at the time of my research – Radwan – an economics graduate majoring in Islamic finances at Zeytouna University – and Achref – an engineer majoring in Islamic finances as well. The three of them dreamed of changing the Tunisian finance system according to Islamic rules, though at least one of them, Achref, worked in a bank that didn't follow the *shari'ya*.

The Young Messengers think of themselves as parts of the Tunisian Islamic movement and of the Muslim Brotherhood's international network. My research was also conducted among militants and intellectuals of the Ennahdha party, the Tunisian political expression of the Brotherhood; the party was founded in 1981 by the leader of the Islamic Tendency Movement Rached Ghannouchi and was illegal until 2011. The Tunisian Islamic movement seeks to spread a model of public life based on the re-Islamization of society and on the Arab-Islamic identity, drifting away from European modernizing ideologies.

DISCURSIVE TRADITIONS

On April 1, 2015 a conference took place in Tunis about moderate Islamic education, organized by the National Union of Imams and religious cadres. Several professors and religious experts joined the conference, which was held in a highly-charged atmosphere due to the fear of religiously motivated violence. This had led to three murders in 2013 and to the infamous Bardo massacre on March 18, 2015. The conference chair

launched an appeal to the *Diwan al-Ifta* (Ministry of Religion) and to the ‘ulema’ of Zeytouna mosque-university to promote a moderate Islamic education, aimed at eradicating terrorism by teaching *shari‘ya* at the secular Universities.

The audience approved of one point of the speech: the courses on *shari‘ya* should clarify what Islam says about *jihad* and terrorism and help the youth counter violence and obscurantism by means of proper Islamic reasoning. The speaker stated that Islam regulates the use of violence, by determining e.g., how to legitimately punish a criminal. On the contrary, terrorism is improper because it kills indiscriminately. He said:

Why are Islamic scholars so often invited to dissociate themselves from violence perpetrated in the name of Islam? The terrorists do dissociate themselves from Islam. They are not legitimated by the doctrine. God rejects violence. *Shari‘ya* punishes harshly violent crimes. (*qisas*)

After the speeches, one of those present asked a question deceptively off the point: how should one consider the thesis of Mohamed Talbi – an influential Tunisian intellectual –, according to which the Holy Coran doesn’t forbid Muslims to drink alcoholic drinks? The question had the room start buzzing and caused much hilarity; the speakers remarked sarcastically that the thesis was just for shock value. The conference chair concluded by saying that

Modern scholars lack an Islamic education, whereas traditional scholars lack a great say. Our presence in the society is weak. Modern intellectuals are philosophers, sociologists, political scientists, though Tunisia provides a fertile breeding ground for Islamic education, since it is a Muslim country. Religious principles are spread in the society. The Islamic revival (*as-sahwa al-Islamiyya*) is a product of modern education.

Despite the speakers’ haughtiness, Talbi’s thesis raises a central issue in the current debate about the incorporation of Islamic texts in the social life of Muslim societies: the issue is about the authority in the interpretation of texts. This is at the core of the anthropology of Islam as well. Besides the trivial detail I mentioned above, Talbi’s vantage point stems from his

intellectual career: a respected historian, through his works Talbi became a leading figure in the current *ijtihad* – the direct interpretation of Islamic texts. More precisely, Talbi joined in the debate led by contemporary thinkers that claim to be authoritative *mujtahid* (the Scripture interpreters). They make a point of ‘reopening’ the direct interpretation of texts, which was officially ‘closed’ after the seminal work of the four main Sunni juridical schools. They draw this idea from two fundamental considerations: 1) *shari‘ya* is not unchangeable, and 2) Islamic ethics is coming at the core of Muslims’ lives in Middle Eastern societies.

Furthermore, the smugness of the speakers’ remarks was likely due to Talbi’s non-religious education. Yet the majority of Tunisian Islamic activists and intellectuals, though claiming the centrality of Islamic ethics in law and society, weren’t educated at the mosque-universities – with the obvious exception of the Islamic movement leader Rached Ghannouchi.

As Achref told me,

Islam has not a single authority, nobody speaks in the name of God. The last man who could do that was the Prophet Muhammad. As for *jihad*, everybody can have a say as well. In the warring nations, like Palestine and Israel, you have to stand up for your people. In that case Islam says you have to struggle, *jihad* in that case is allowed and it means defence. This is not the case in Tunisia, there’s no conflict here. Here Islam is understood as a civilization that came up after Carthage and Rome. That’s why Zeytouna is so important, as a byword for the first Islamic civilization in North Africa. The young Tunisians that join the Da‘esh are not Muslims. There’s no violence in Islam.

Achref, Talbi, and the conference chair, assigned a prescriptive value to something they called Islam: the chair and Achref ascribed to Islam the prohibition of wholesale violence and alcoholic drinks; Talbi assigned to Islam the leave to drink alcoholic drinks. The three of them assumed the existence of one object called Islam, whose essence could be found in its founding texts. This essentialist idea of Islam, spread by orientalist studies of religious texts, is ingrained in the Western and Middle Eastern debate about Islam.

The anthropology of Islam challenged the idea of Islam as an historical totality that depends on a scriptural essence and determines the social structures of Muslim societies. Anthropology brings to the fore a complex yet challenging facet of the study of Islam and Muslims, that is the plurality of Islamic expressions and forms in different cultural contexts. Lukens-Bull (1999) stated effectively that Muslims agree that Islam is submission to God, but don't agree how to submit. As for the anthropological study of Islam, the point of disagreement is the definition of the very subject, since the variety of Islamic expressions makes it fuzzy. As a consequence, neither Muslims nor anthropologists agree what is Islamic and what is not. Giving both an emic and ethic definition of Islam is not an easy task.

The scriptural tendency, whose influence on Muslim masses rose through the Twentieth century, excludes the forms of piety and interpretation contrasting with the general and 'central' principles of religion. According to scripturalism, such principles emerge from the Islamic scriptural corpus - the Coran, the Sunna, the classical juridical doctrine and the development of the studies carried out by Islamic scholars with different interests in different times. In other terms, scripturalism assigns a central role to the texts and invests the scholars with the authority to determine the properness of Islamic practices. From this perspective, such practices as the Saints worship, mysticism, brotherhoods, trance and possession are disregarded as improper (often local) interpretations of Islam, since they aren't allowed by scriptures, though their practitioners think of themselves as good Muslims.

In fact, the anthropological glance acknowledges such practices as research subjects. Focusing on the social actors' point of view, rather than on the texts, anthropologists wonder first who Muslims are, what they do and what they believe, rather than what Islam is and what it prescribes. Furthermore, whereas the studies that focus only on texts seek to grasp the metahistorical essence of Islam, anthropology studies comparatively the historical, cultural and social differences of Islamic practices and representations in different Middle Eastern contexts. Anthropologists working with social actors that consider themselves Muslims, have developed several theories that number disparate behaviors, ritual and beliefs among Islamic practices.

From the anthropological perspective, scripturalism itself is but one of the many representations of the Islamic belonging. Besides the Wahhabist extremisms – that in Tunisia hit some mausoleums and sacred Islamic places -, currently almost all Muslims acknowledge texts as central in their religion. The young Islamic activists I worked with, whose discursive practices I analyse, master the erudite developments of Tunisian Islamic thought.

One major anthropological approach, drawing on el-Zein (1977) and Asad (1986, 1993), stresses the concept of tradition in Islam. This approach accomplished the hard task to reconcile the heterogeneity of practices with the centrality of texts. Anthropologists dealing with the dynamic change/continuity in Islamic practices and representations consider Islam as a general frame to which different traditions – both practical and discursive – refer. In this perspective, Islam is considered as a complex of discursive traditions that comprises - and relates with - the founding texts (the Coran and the Hadiths). Islamic discursive traditions are made of discourses and argumentative practices depending on an interpretive involvement with a series of founding texts. Such discourses and argumentative practices allow the practitioners of a given tradition to tell a proper action from an incorrect one.

Islamic traditions do not authorize just any practice though. During my fieldwork in Syria (2002-5), for instance, I found several places in the hilly suburbs of Damascus, whose keepers claimed were related to some holy figures of Islam; though only one of them (*al-Maqam al-'arba'een*, literally the 'Place of the Forty') was linked to a discursive tradition that related it to some Islamic events and figures (the killing of Abel, the Seven Sleepers) and assured the holiness of the place and the authoritativeness of the family in charge of keeping it. Tradition indeed is interrelated with authority: the anthropology of Islam analyses the action of key religious figures that authorize certain interpretations of Islamic tradition and forbid others. A given practice is Islamic because it is recognized by Islamic discursive traditions and is taught as such to Muslims. Some Muslims have the power to validate the proper practices and dismiss the improper ones. By doing so, they authorize and hand down the traditions that inform the Islamic practices. Anthropology of Islam seeks to grasp the ways an “authorizing

criterion” (Geertz 1968, 1975) is accepted or challenged. The validation and continuity of tradition depend on specific power conditions; anthropology analyses the different ways such powers are wielded, the social, political and economic condition that enable them, the resistances, debates and conflicts they encounter. The interrelationship tradition-authority generates disputes and claims among different subjects, such as - in the Tunisian case - the traditional scholars, the new Islamic intellectuals and the political power that aims for the hegemony of religious discourse.

The study of Islam as a discursive tradition postulates the central role of textual reference in Muslims’ practices. Muslims’ discursive traditions entail reasoning on the basis of founding texts: as a consequence, grasping their point of view involves the anthropologist’s (at least minimal) knowledge of such texts.

The Islamic discourses change according to people’s aims, historical circumstances, social conditions. Therefore, the study of Islam as a discursive tradition analyses the interaction among daily practices, religious texts, books of history, political texts and discourses. According to Bowen (2012), the ‘new anthropology of Islam’ analyses the understandings, uses and transmission of religious texts and ideas in different cultural contexts.

In my research among the activists of Tunisian Islamic movement, I stated that many Muslims start from the study of texts related to the discursive tradition of the principles of Islam, and link such texts to the current national social and political questions (freedom, equity, human rights, and pluralism). These socio-political actors think themselves as followers of a particular tradition (the ‘specificity of Tunisian Islam’), related to the general framework of the universality of Islam. The cultural meanings of being Muslims in the post-revolutionary Tunisia emerge from this relationship local/universal. The major Islamic political and juridical issues are manipulated and related to the specific context, to the values and needs of contemporary Tunisia and arouse debates among Tunisian Muslims about which elements of this manipulation can legitimately be considered Islamic.

Can one determine the proper interpretation of Islamic scriptures, in order to grasp the Islamic stance about such daily practices as the

consumption of certain foods? Can secular scholars, activists and politicians consider themselves (and be considered as) authoritative interpreters?

As Rafik Abdessalem told me in April 2015, ‘the authoritative interpretation depends on the consensus (*al-ijma'*) of the majority of Muslims. Anthropological research has shown the widespread circulation in the contemporary Islamic world – and in particular in the Middle East – of voices that regard themselves and are acknowledged as authoritative by multi-faceted ‘majorities’ of Muslims. Many Muslim societies disagree on the authority of single scholars and on how seriously common Muslims should take their statements (Hefner 2005). The recent re-Islamization of several Muslim societies – such as Tunisia – makes room for debate, contestation and democratic participation.

Back to the questions raised by Talbi’s stance, can secular intellectuals claim their authority in the interpretation of Islamic sources? I had a conversation about this issue in March 2015 with Meherzia Labidi, an Islamist Member of the Parliament and the former vice-president of the National Constituent Assembly. According to Mrs Labidi, it’s necessary to interpret the religious sources in the light of the questions and needs of contemporary society.

Copertino: Some *imams* authorize violent preaching and practices; provided that a number of followers acknowledge their authority, should we infer that their advice is authoritative and accept it as a plausible interpretation of scriptures?

Labidi: We don’t judge an idea from the number of people that follow it. Nazism and fascism had millions of followers! It’s not a matter of consensus (*ijma'*) but of logic, of coherence between the purpose of religion and daily practices. The purpose of religion (as the Latin etymology of the term *religio* tells) is to facilitate the relationships among people, and to link people at two levels, vertical (the transcendent dimension) and horizontal (the social level). Therefore, the purpose is to build peace in the hearts, in the families, in the towns and in the world. We only can do that if we transform conflicts into peaceful interrelationships. Living with dignity (*karama*) means living with justice, safety and respect. These are the values we should keep in mind while reading our holy scriptures. All texts should be read and interpreted, reckoning with humanities, namely philology – to understand their original language -, history – to understand the contexts in which they were written -, social

sciences – to understand the present of scriptures. How can we interpret properly our holy scriptures if we don't consider modern science? Could we maintain that the Earth doesn't revolve around the Sun? And similarly we can't accept those interpretations that are in contrast with our values and science. The holy Quran conceals several values and meanings. Since it stems from a high source, it entails the readers' efforts to improve in reading. Its meanings are folded in the text and our effort is aimed at unfolding them.

Ijtihad, that is the individual interpretation of sources to infer the models of pious behaviors, has a broad social foundation in Tunisia, considering the high percentage of children in school, the top-level of Tunisian higher education in the Arab world (Anderson 2011), and the wide diffusion of competences to read and understand the religious sources, often achieved through self-study method, cheap books, cassettes and new media (Eickelman e Anderson 2003). This probably means that the vertical distinction of Islamic discursive traditions – on the one side common Muslims' practices and ideas, on the other the learned reflections of the cliquy elite of religious scholars -, in Tunisia is more blurred than in other Islamic contexts.

The Islamic intellectuals I worked with, having studied in secular Tunisian and Western universities, didn't specialize in the traditional educational system of *madares* and mosque-universities, but deepened the Islamic disciplines as self-taught persons, through public reading and debates. As a consequence, they are able to link the Islamic texts with contemporary issues, such as the scientific and technologic development, democracy and human rights. They are part of a transnational class of new Muslim intellectuals (Eickelman and Piscatori 1996; Esposito and Voll 2001), professionals, teachers and preachers whose education, methods and aims are different from traditional '*ulema*'s.

The contemporary *da'wa* is also practiced by an educated public. Indeed the *du'at*'s textual practices entail the scriptural reference as a basis for the debate about the properness of a given practice. The *du'at* are able to link pious practices with the knowledge of scriptures. E.g., during a conversation we had about divine and human judgement, Yahia quoted two verses of the Coran, according to which God will show to humans the result of their deeds

in the Judgement day: ‘So whoever does an atom’s weight of good will see it, and whoever does an atom’s weight of evil will see it’ (Cor. 99: 7-8).

The aims of the *rabata* Ash-Shabab ar-Rissali involve the study and teaching of Islamic principles and the public debate in all daily contexts. Besides the Coran, in our conversations they often referred to classic and contemporary Islamic thinkers. Speaking of the relationship between Islam and other religions, Ridwan quoted a passage from an Islamic jurist: ‘The law of our predecessors is our law, provided it doesn’t infringe on it’ (*shar’ min qublana huwa shar’ linna mahi ikhalifna*). Tunisian *du‘at* use scriptural sources (Coran and *hadith*) and the classical and modern Islamic intellectuals’ works as a framework for the public debate about the practical models that enable an active pious life, engaged in spreading the Islamic message, through text reading, reference to tradition and practical example. Therefore, *da‘wa* is aimed at reforming and reconstructing the Islamic discursive traditions.

THE SPECIFICITY OF TUNISIAN ISLAM: THE DISCOURSE ABOUT PLURALISM, MODERATION, DEMOCRACY

In the autumn of 2013, an advertising campaign was conducted through placards reading ‘Different yet united. Tolerant Tunisia’ (*mukhtalifin wadima mutahdin. Tunis al-tasameh*) and showing the collage-shaped faces of a man and a woman with a smile on their faces (Figure 1). The placards conveyed the idea of a colourful and multi-faceted mosaic, emblematic of the cultural diversity of Tunisians. At the same time, watching this image you couldn’t help noticing the external signs of the two people’s Islamic belonging. Though nuanced and made of snatches of different faces, the Tunisian man and woman in the picture were immediately identifiable as Muslims: the man was wearing the classic traditional Tunisian headcloth and a short/long (depending on the different tesserae) beard. The woman was wearing a *hijab*, a scarf round her neck and a loose-fitting dress.

This government campaign was issued at a time when a part of the public opinion was accusing the Islamic-led majority of the National Constituent

Assembly of conniving with radical Islamists, responsible of recent political killings. The campaign sums up the debate on pluralism the Islamic movement undertook in conjunction with the Tunisian revolutionary process.



Figure 1. The advertising campaign conducted in the autumn of 2013

Both man and woman's wear winked at the local traditions: the man's headcloth in particular was an item of clothing Tunisian elderly men wear mostly. In fact, the man in the picture (or better the mosaic of picture of different men) was a youthful-appearing person. Therefore, the campaign conveyed a traditionalist – rather than traditional – message.

Commenting on this image, Achref told me:

As I see it, it's an image of tolerance. It means that here in Tunisia there are differences. You must respect people's choices. For instance, if women want to wear the veil, that's a choice of their own. Some want to pray, wear a beard, others don't. Islam doesn't dictate such things. It's not a doctrine. But that placard also tells that the country's Islamic tradition must be respected. The individual must be respected, but also the majority of society, which has traditional values. Our tradition is linked to a pluralist and tolerant Islam handed down by Zeytouna. Many *taleb* (students) from the Islamic world came here to study. We are committed to revive our tradition.

The theme of Tunisian Islamic traditions is part of a broader discourse about the Tunisian specificity (*al-khusuiya at-tunisiya*), whose main elements are Islam, toleration, pluralism and moderation. As Meherzia Labidi told me (April 2015)

The 97% of Tunisian are Muslims, mostly Ashari and Maliki. This doesn't imply we should simply consider Tunisia as an Islamic country. There are different ideas of religiosity: for some religion is paramount in their lives, for others it is not. Furthermore, we have to consider our belonging to the Arab world: we couldn't identify ourselves outside this reference. Others stress Tunisians' Mediterranean belonging. In one sense this is religious and cultural pluralism that implies many ways to live difference.

This idea was conveyed to me by Yahia too. According to him, the specificity of Tunisian Islam lies in the habit of difference:

Tunisia is small, yet it experienced several civilizations: Carthaginians, Romans, Fatimids, and Andalusians. We don't have many resources, but our geographic position is strategic: Europeans and Westerners must go past Tunisia to get to Africa. That's why many civilizations have been here alternately and became parts of Tunisian culture. And that's why Tunisian Islam is open, because culture is in concordance with religion: Tunisian women share in life, they go to school, work, drive, and share in society. The Coran says there is no compulsion in religion. This means that Islam accepts religious difference. On the contrary, other religions don't respect difference and seek to convert the others.

As he often did while speaking about politics, Yahia referred to the work of some Islamic intellectuals, such as the contemporary Iranian scholar Abdolkarim Soroush. He said:

According to Soroush, religious pluralism is a focal point for both Islamic and secular democratic governments. In Tunisia, protecting religious variety means protecting difference in general. It also means constructing a plural political system.

Coexistence of differences is among the aims of the *rabata* ash-Shabab ar-Rissali. One of the outspoken aims is to ‘foster dialogue (*manteq al-hawar*) and coexistence (*at-ta‘ish al-mushtarek*)’. As Achref told me,

The ideas of dialogue and coexistence are different from toleration. For instance, in the Islamic empires minorities were tolerated and protected. But we don’t have in mind the idea of an Islamic State. Our country is ruled by law, it’s a Republic. The specific Tunisian Islam is pluralist and respects differences.

This perspective informs the Islamic discourse in Tunisia; many activists and chiefs, coming from civil society and *da‘wa*, share such values. The ideas of personal choice, pluralism, and coexistence permeate the public discourse of the Islamic movement leaders (Copertino 2017, Haugbolle & Cavatorta 2012).

On a political level, the discourse of Tunisian specificity includes such concepts as *nasiha* (the scholars’ advice to rulers), *bay‘a* (the delegation of power from *Umma* to rulers), *shura* (the elective organ of *Umma*), *ijma‘* (the scholars’ consensus about legal innovations), *‘ilmaniyya* (secularism in accordance with the Islamic ideas of knowledge and progress), *‘almaniyya ‘ijra‘iyya* and *‘almaiyya juz‘iyya* (procedural secularism and partial secularism, meaning the separation of power in contrast to integral secularism - *‘almaniyya shamila* – and the exclusion of religion from public life), *ad-dawla al-madaniya* (the civil State, that includes religion among its fundamentals, in opposition to the secular State - *ad-dawla al-‘almaniyya* -, that excludes religion, and the theocratic State – that subjugates Mosques, *madares* and other religious institutions), *mujtama‘ al-madani* (civil society, springing from *madares*, juridical *madhab*, sufi *tariqat*, religious endowments – *waqf* - and mosque-universities), *hurriyya wa karama* (freedom and dignity – the slogan of 2011 Revolution – meaning the *umma* sovereignty and the protection of people from social injustice and despotism).

The discourse of Tunisian specificity draws both on the Tunisian Islamic jurists’ thought and the traditional religious practices (*at-tadayun at-taqlidi at-tunisi*), such as Sufism and Saints worship. According to *sheikh*, Rached

Ghannouchi – the leader of the Islamic movement – the development of democratic thought and secularization of political sphere are the elements of Tunisian specificity. This discourse frames a project of Islamic modernity independently from both the European model and non-Tunisian Islamic reformers.

Tunisian Islamists consider Zeytouna mosque-university as the main stakeholder of the project for a specific Tunisian Islamic modernity. In the pre-colonial era Zeytouna scholars developed a modernization program aimed at benefiting from modern science and administration into an Islamic practical and theoretical framework. The intellectual work of these scholars inspired the nineteenth century Tunisian reformists' thought and indirectly the drawing of the 1864 Constitution, which limited the rulers' power, for the first time in the Islamic world. Government technics and tools developed by European liberal thinkers were embraced by Tunisian reformers, who adapted them into a theoretical framework that comprised Islam and its Tunisian specific features. The Tunisian Islamic movement would draw its inspiration from this reforming project.

The discourse of Tunisian specificity provides the Islamic intelligentsia with a vocabulary to formulate its own project of modernity, conceived as a cultural, social and political reform, that outdoes religious traditionalism, revives nineteenth-century reformers' rationalism, and puts forward a pattern of national cohesiveness based not on the Scriptures and the *sharia* as unchangeable legal reference, but on an ethical stance inspired by the fundamental principles (*maqasid*, pl. of *maqsud*).

According to my informant Achref, stressing coexistence is the main feature of Tunisian specificity. As he told me in 2013:

The *arkan* of Islam don't change according to the country where Muslims live, yet the properties of society are different in Afghanistan, in Saudi Arabia and in America. Cultural contexts change. For instance, in the Tunisian tradition men and women are used to work together. It's not the same in Saudi Arabia. They believe that Islam involves segregation. The main feature of Tunisian society is peacefulness, moderation. And this is also the feature of Tunisian Islam we [the members of the *rabata*] respect: we are moderate (*wasat*), we oppose *jihad*.

Tunisian Islam is tolerant: that's why we organize public discussions, with people who believe, but also with non-believers. This is secularism. It's respect of differences. An Islamic State protects non-Muslims. The Holy Coran says: 'Let him who will believe, and let him who will reject it'.

Osama as-Saghir drew to my attention to such issue at a political level:

In the new Constitution, the principle of freedom of conscience (*hurriya as-samir*) replaced the 'respect of other faiths': the latter is only about religious freedom, whereas the former is all-embracing.

It follows that, in the Islamic discourse, pluralism is not meant just as coexistence of different faiths and visions of Islam but covers the active confrontation with people who don't share any religious belief. As Yahia told me, commenting on the cited principle of the *rabata ash-Shabab ar-Rissali*:

We foster coexistence (*at-ta'ish al-mushtarek*) and dialogue (*al-hawar*) also with non-Muslims. We don't seek to create an Islamic State. We are in a Republic, we live under the rule of law. We don't like the model of the Islamic empire.

In their daily life, *du'at*'s relationships include mainly people who don't share the Islamic discourse. Achref told me:

It is necessary to go out with different people, to speak with those who see it differently. We have to show open-mindedness and confidence (*sadaqa*), we have to smile. Because a good Muslim explains things he lives and suffers for. If someone tells that I'm a terrorist, I don't stay home, but I go out and explain him my view.

He counterpointed this idea quoting one *hadith*:

The Prophet Muhammad once said: 'Don't come between me and people' (*khallaqu baini wa baina an-nas*), namely let me speak with people, let me explain. This is freedom. It means sharing one's ideas with the others.

Another element of the discourse of Tunisian specificity is the moderation of local Islam, in opposition to an ‘exogenous’ and radical Islam. In March of 2015, *imam* Houcine Laabidi was dismissed from his office at Zeytouna, the main mosque-university in Tunisia, on a charge of giving radical *khutba* (sermons) and inspiring violence. Such decision, undertaken by the newly-elected minister of Religious Affairs, was part of a series of actions to take the ‘illegal’ mosques – built spontaneously without any public permission - under the State control. On Friday, April 3, 2015 the first collective prayer (*al-jumu‘a*) after *imam* Laabidi’s removal took place, in the presence of the premier Essid and the minister of Religious Affairs himself. The deployment of police was huge and I was stopped and questioned by some officers, since I was taking some pictures and strolling around in search of a friend of mine.

The government campaign against extremist Islam was part of the discourse of Tunisian specific Islam, pluralist and moderate, whose centre of elaboration is Zeytouna. As Islamist Deputy Imen Ben Mohammed told me:

Tunisian Islam is moderate, as shown by Yadh Ben Achour’s works, and took Enlightenment into the interpretation of Islam and the Coran. Our local Islam is *maliki*, it was elaborated by our ‘*ulema*’ at Zeytouna.

The ‘exogenous’, Wahhabi-inspired and fundamentalist Islam, is held responsible for several acts of violence against traditional places of worship, such as *zaouiat* and Saints’ tombs that followed one another since 2011. During a meeting on religious toleration, held at Tunis on February 16, 2013, Mazen Cherif - vice-president of the Union of Sufi brotherhoods – reported the destruction of some mausoleums and the violence against pilgrims, whose perpetrators were youth indoctrinated by Wahhabi preachers, who frequently visited Tunisia and forced many local *imams* to fall into line with their political and religious visions. Several mosques, among which Zeytouna, had fallen under these preachers’ control.

The opposition local/exogenous Islam has been stressed after the tragic attack at the Bardo Museum, in March 2015. During a meeting of the *rabata* ash-Shabab ar-Rissali, the same year, the *du‘at* debated about such event.

My informant Ridwan structured his speech around the repudiation of violence and excess. He started from one *hadith*, reported by Abu Dawud, according to whom Prophet Muhammad warned his Companions (*as-sahabah*) saying: ‘There’ll be trouble for those who give way to excess! (*al-mutanatti’un*)’. Ridwan counterpointed his reference to Sunna with a quotation from the Coran: ‘Don’t go too far. God doesn’t love those who go too far’ (Cor. 5, 87).

Indeed, one of the aims of the *rabata* reads: ‘Spreading the values of moderation (*al-wasatiya*) and the authentic sense [of the sacred texts] and cleansing them from falsification (*tashuwiya*) and distortion (*tahrif*)’. As my informant Yahia explained me,

There is a wrong definition of *wasatiya*. Some say they’re at the centre of Islam, but what do they mean? That’s why we have to grasp the authentic sense of the Scriptures and to correct the wrong interpretations.

This means that young *du‘at* feel duty bound to engage into an educational *ijtihad*, aimed at spreading the values they consider as features of the specific Tunisian Islam: pluralism, moderation, democracy.

CONCLUSION: ISLAMIC MODERNITY

The Islamic movement is engaged in the elaboration of the concept of modernity independently from the definition made by bourgeois nationalism (Spivak 1988). As Abdessalem Rafik told me,

Modernity doesn’t mean secularization. In the Fifties there was an attempt to secularize Tunisian society. But now religion comes back into public debate and into the public sphere. It’s thirty years it came back, it’s a global dynamic. New Islamists are the fruit of modernization: there’s an Islamists’ specific idea of modernity. Habermas spoke of modernity as a non-finished process. There are different forms of modernity. In the Islamic world, e.g., in Iran, modernity is expressed in Shia terms. In Tunisia the idea of modernity is influenced by Sunnism and the contact with Europe. Muslim Brothers were modernizers and drew on the Islamic reformers, which tried to combine Islam and modernity. According to al-

Afghani and Abduh, modernity meant adopting modern tools, such as administration, science and university, in an Islamic framework. As Islamic activists, we believe in the suitability of Islam to modernity: Islam is many-sided and changes according to different contexts, such as modernity.

The critique of the concept of modernity as abstract rationality, evolution and efficiency (Williams 1983) and of modernization as a pure and rootless process, independent from history and culture, puts Tunisian Islamism among the alternative projects of modernity and modernization, meant as plural processes rather than singular phenomena. Modernity, according to some authors (e.g., Touraine 1992), originated from European political, technical and scientific achievements. Being modern in such sectors means overstepping traditional ways of thinking, beliefs, social relationships and lifestyles, and trusting in the teleological power of rationality. Religion is excluded from such model. As a consequence, modern societies cannot be founded on divine revelation.

Anthropologists that studied the projects of ‘multiple modernities’ (Appadurai 1996) started from the analysis of modernization as a series of discursive processes associated with Western domination and liberal tradition (Kahn 2001, 657). They showed the ways modernity – a singular Western-originated process – changes and ‘goes native’ meeting non-Western contexts as a consequence of the colonial domination. Furthermore, drawing on Goody’s ‘archaeo-anthropological’ method, they noticed that progresses in specific sectors – comparable to European modernization – emerged simultaneously in Eurasia. This steals back to Europe the primacy of modernization (the object of the ‘Theft of history’ according to Goody). The analysis of modern discourses and practices in other cultural contexts leads to consider them as alternative modernities (Ong 1999) rather than adaptations of Western modernity.

The Islamic model of social transformation in Tunisia is modern inasmuch as it involves the break with the past, developing such subjects as secularization, democracy, civil State, civil society, pluralism, moderation and coexistence. The reference to fundamental Islamic texts by means of discursive traditions is not a traditionalist project. On the contrary, it is a

mould-breaking method, aimed at promoting individual reasoning – beyond traditional authorities -, picking out the fundamental principles of religion, creating a scale of values for society and helping the ruling class to develop the ground rules of public life.

Furthermore, the Islamic model is anti-traditionalist inasmuch as it virtually acknowledges the whole *umma* the right to study and interpret the scriptural sources. This model is radically different from the project of secularist modernization of the Westernized Tunisian elites, which excluded the Islamic practices and reasoning forms from public life. In the Islamic discourse, reason – a central value of the modern mind-set – is promoted by Islam inasmuch as every single Muslim is granted powers of reasoning individually, removing such right from the control of traditional Islamic authorities. This is the main contribution provided by the Tunisian movement to the project of Islamic modernity.

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