

Punjab's governor who defended Christians

Taseer's murder leads also Muslims to discover their own "Righteous"

by Valentina Colombo

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After World War Two, the term "Righteous among the nations" was used in reference to the non-Jews who behaved heroically, risking death to save the lives of even just one Jew from the Nazi genocide known as the Holocaust. Well then, the savage murder of Salman Taseer, governor of the Pakistani province of Punjab, motivated by his support to the campaign for the abolition of the blasphemy law and his struggle for the liberation of Asia Bibi, the Christian woman sentenced to death, should lead us to reflect and maybe broaden the definition of Righteous among the nations to include all those people who risk their lives to help others regardless of their religious creed.

The case of Punjab's governor is representative of this issue and it also compels us to further reflect on the blasphemy laws in force not only in Pakistan, but in the whole Islamic world, laws which hit not only religious minorities, but also and above all Muslims themselves.

Pontiff Benedict XVI's words are surely headed in this direction: "I once more encourage the leaders of that country to take the necessary steps to abrogate that law, all the more so because it is clear that it serves as a pretext for acts of injustice and violence against religious minorities. The tragic murder of the governor of Punjab shows the urgent need to make progress in this direction: the worship of God promotes brotherhood and love, not hatred and violence".

Nevertheless it will not be easy to abolish or reform the blasphemy law either in Pakistan or in other Muslim Countries. In Pakistan it was introduced in 1986, it provides for life in jail for those who offend and death penalty in case of offense to Mohammed. It is broadly to be found in article 295b of the Pakistani Criminal Code, which deals with offense to religion and the Koran. The former may be punished with life in jail, while defaming Mohammed can cost death or life in jail.

Article 298a prohibits any derogatory comment or representation concerning characters sacred to Muslim faith, such as the Prophet's wives and family and the first four Caliphs of Islam.

Despite the Parliament's decision of 26 October according to which police must assess facts before demanding detainment of the defendant, as a matter of facts police still behave arbitrarily. Asia Bibi's case proves it. In June 2009 Ms. Bibi, a peasant worker, went to fetch some water and a group of Muslim women rejected her saying that, as a Christian, she should not touch the water bowl. Later on the women called the authorities saying that Asia would have offended Prophet Mohammed in the subsequent argument.

Although the Pakistani Commission on Women's condition, established in 2000 to remove gender discriminations, demanded the immediate liberation of Asia Bibi as it is unlawful to ask a Christian woman to abide of the Islamic principles, the situation seems unchanged. Salman Taseer had defined the blasphemy law as the "black law", but in my opinion that definition would better suit the Constitution of Pakistan and the one of many other Muslim Countries.

Based on the Constitution, Pakistan's official denomination is "Islamic Republic of Pakistan" (art. 1). Always according to the Constitution (art. 2) Islam is the State religion. All this is reasserted in art. 31 stating that "Steps shall be taken to enable the Muslims of Pakistan, individually and collectively, to order their lives in accordance with the fundamental principles and basic concepts of Islam and to provide facilities whereby they may be enabled to understand the meaning of life

according to the Holy Quran and Sunnah”.

It is precisely the Constitution that features the solution to the problem, and at the same time the impossibility to find one, especially in Egypt, Jordan and Kuwait, not to mention Saudi Arabia and Iran. In Egypt, the scene of the assaults against the Copts, in 1971 the Supreme Court approved a law stating that “Islam is the State religion and any law against Islam is against the Constitution”. Although there is no law about apostasy or the treatment of non submitted Christians, since 1981 the amendment to article 2 of the Egyptian Constitution enabled Sharia to pass from being “one of the main sources of legislation” to become “the legislation’s main source”.

This is true also in moderate Jordan although the Constitution of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan states in article 14 that “The State shall safeguard the free exercise of all forms of worship and religious rites in accordance with the customs observed in the Kingdom, unless such is inconsistent with public order or morality” and in article 15 that “The State shall guarantee freedom of opinion. Every Jordanian shall be free to express his opinion by speech, in writing, or by means of photographic representation and other forms of expression, provided that such does not violate the law. Freedom of the press and publications shall be ensured within the limits of the law. Newspapers shall not be suspended from publication nor shall their permits be revoked except in accordance with the provisions of the law. In the event of the declaration of martial law or a state of emergency, a limited censorship on newspapers, publications, books and broadcasts in matters affecting public safety and national defence may be imposed by law. Control of the resources of newspaper shall be regulated by law.”

At the same time article 37 of the Jordan press law is very clear and sets remarkable limits to freedom of expression in the Country: “It is forbidden to publish anything that offends or insults one of the religions and denominations whose freedom is sanctioned by the Constitution”. Subsequently, wherever Islam determines lawmaking. discrimination of the others, namely Christians or Muslims daring to criticize the extremist and literal interpretation of the Koran, is accepted.

Wise and courageous are the words of Ejaz Ahmad, the director of ‘Azad’, a magazine in Urdu language published in Italy, who says that " the Pakistani government could also heed this call of the Pope, but the real problem lays elsewhere: Without the votes of the Islamic parties it will never have the Parliamentary majority needed to scrap the blasphemy law". Ahmad raised a sore point. Nowadays every government in the Muslim world must compromise with religious fundamentalism thus making it impossible to pass any reform - of the Constitution or of anything else - aimed at limiting the interference of Islam in the public domain. Ejaz Ahmad reaffirms a sad truth, which doesn’t only apply to Pakistan: “Unfortunately this law is used to arrest all dissident voices, from Christians to left-wing intellectuals. The real problem is that fundamentalism advances more and more in the Country and this imperils the future of Pakistan and makes it impossible to repeal this law”.

Well then, it is a Pakistani, a Muslim living in our Country, who denounces the abuse of religion perpetrated in order to discriminate Christians, Jews, liberal Muslims. It has been a Pakistani and a Muslim who has lost his life following his support to a Christian woman sentenced to death. I think the moment has come to honour the Righteous among the Muslims, to join their unconditional struggle against Islamic extremism. I think the moment has come for Western institutions and governments, the European Union, the Holy Seat to open their eyes and avoid the dialogue “Assisi-style” and with the “Islamic associations”.

I think the moment has come to talk about fundamental and universal human rights that need to be promoted without hesitation so that we will not anylonger have to mourn the killings of Copts in Egypt, Christians in Iraq and elsewhere in the Islamic world, neither the death of such courageous people as Salman Taseer.

translated by Carolina Figini