The Question of Minority Rights in Arab Countries, is a Religious or a National Issues?

Francesca Maria Corrao

One current focus of the UN's activities is to encourage new generations to take action under the theme "Speak Up, Stop Discrimination." Daisaku Ikeda believes that the world's religions should begin discussions regarding the contributions each can make, and this theme provides an excellent starting point. In fact Ikeda writes: "Religion can be the base for a philosophy of coexistence that allows humanity to face and overcome the evils threatening its own existence"[1].

Around the world, the question of how states should deal with rights in order to promote human development is an important and sensitive issue. Particularly in these last years the question of diversities and minorities arise as a crucial factor for peace in Arab countries.

I would examine some strands of political thought within the pan-Arabic world, in particular the different strands of secular Arab nationalist thought in comparison with some Islamist thought.

In this paper starting from Ikeda's point of view I will try to understand if the crises in the relation among Arab Majority and local minority arches back to religious or national thought and if there is the possibility for a non violent solution to the problem compatible with existing local discourses.

Many Arab intellectuals don't feel at ease in promoting a debate on Minority rights simply because in the past history there is the sample of the "Pakistan solution", and after the Sudan referendum they won-

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1) D. Ikeda, "Toward a World of Dignity for All: The Triumph of Creative Life" 2011 Peace Proposal, in http://www.daisakuikeda.org/sub/resolution, p. 23–6.

der if partition is the sole solution. Some believe that Islam is able to give peaceful answer to minority demands, others affirm that secular citizenship, like in Turkey, is the right solution.

In the modern democratic Western State it is difficult to recognize the right to be different as it seems to be contradicting the idea of equal rights for the citizen. If we want to consider the Arab-Islamic area, we should first understand where is the limit between the right of the individual and the respect of the legitimate right to be different?

It is difficult to give a unique definition for minority in the Arab-Islamic area, I will take into account here the North Africa and the Middle East. The Arab people are defined as such because they all speak the same language. Arab is the language of the Quran, therefore it is considered a sacred language; most of the State in this area are Islamic and the official language is Arabic. Different religious communities live in Middle East but they mostly don't feel discriminated because of the language. Their condition is different from one state to another, as Christians enjoy civil right in Syria, they can have access to important social positions. In Egypt the Copts are culturally assimilated, but have difficulties in improving their career in institutional positions, and cannot build or adjust churches. The Amazigh in Western North Africa are Muslims but they claim the right to use their own language; they are culturally assimilated as they took part in the anti-colonial struggle and the fight for their rights contributed to the general battle for a more democratic state.

Some ethnic minorities claim for their rights to rule autonomously their land, as for instance the Kurds in Syria where they do not enjoy the status of citizen[2]. Always in Syria the Armenians and the Caldeans enjoy certain freedom but not the Sunni Muslim even if they are numerically the majority. The Alawites, a Shiite minority, is ruling the State since over fifty years[3].

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2) The Kurds took parte to the Syrian Nation building but after the United Arab Republic in 1958 was implemented, the Government started attacking their rights until it considered them foreigners, since 1962 the Kurds live in Syria but they have not the citizenship therefore they cannot officially get married, or frequent the public schools or hospitals, in M. Galletti, *I Curdi nella storia*, Chieti, Vecchio Faggio 1990, pp. 213–4.

3) G. Endress, *Islam. An Historical Introduction*, N.Y., Columbia UP, 2002.

In Lebanon the Constitution gives equal rights to Shiites, Druse and Christians, their participation in the parliament depends on their share not on their quality; recently the Shiites are asking to change the constitution because once they were the minority and now that they are the majority claim a more equal share of deputy in the Parliament.

Now lets consider the fact that an individual does not choose to belong to a minority, it happens to be so since the birth, and it is difficult to change status without being discriminated by its own group and the majority[4]. We observe that this is the case for the Christian that will be rejected by his original community if wants to marry a Muslim woman; furthermore he will not be able to marry her unless he becomes Muslim. A Muslim woman cannot marry a Christian man because she cannot change her faith; in fact it is prohibited in the Muslim religion and in those State where the Shari'a is applied the apostates are persecuted[5]. It is not the case to speak of endogamy because a Muslim can marry a Christian woman.

As we have seen there are different order of problems to be taken into account when studying the minorities in the MENA (Middle East and North Africa) area. From the few examples we can notice that in this area to be a minority is not a numerical problem but rather a question of having equal rights to access to influent social positions[6].

For some years now the issues of civil society, from respect of human rights to the defence of the minorities, have loomed large in reflection on the prospects for development in the Arab world. The call for greater freedom and constitutional guarantees is central to the demands of the citizens in the revolts of these last few months, leaving questions of ethnic and religious differences in the background[7].

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4) C. Wagley and M. Harris, *Minorities in the New World: Six Case Studies*, N.Y., Columbia U.P., 1958, p. 10.
5) "Human Rights in Islam", in *The Journal of Oriental Studies*, n. 9, Tokyo, 1999, pp. 78–95.
6) Amersfoort, H. van. "Minority as a Sociological Concept" in *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 1, no. 2 (1978), pp. 218–234.
7) The topic was discussed in the Conference organized by the Community of S. Egidio *Agenda of Living Together. Christians and Muslims For a Future Together*, Rome 23 February 2011; see also *Un destino comune. Cristiani e Musulmani in Medio Oriente*, intr. Andrea Riccardi, I Libri di S. Egidio, Leonardo International, Rome 2010.

In a recent meeting between various religious representatives of the Christians minorities in Muslim area, emerged clearly the will to collaborate in promoting education in respect of the others' culture. One point was particularly striking: highlighted by the Muslims was the important contribution of Christian intellectuals to the Arab cultural renaissance. It was also pointed out that citizenship policy had rebalanced relations between the various communities within many Muslim States.

Here we will examine the issue of the rights of minorities begin with some general points and then go on to examine the positions of some authoritative religious and secular exponents.

1. Promise of fair and free government in Islam

Since Muhammad 'Abduh (1849–1905) launched reform of Islamic thought to Sayid Qutb, there is an important evolution in a more conservative interpretation of Islam, closer to an idealized model.

Both the religious movements and the secular parties played their part in the liberation of the Arab countries, united with the local minorities by a common national spirit. We also know that in both Syria and Lebanon renowned Christian intellectuals were prominent among the theoreticians of the newly founded nationalist parties[8].

Moreover, on coming to power the nationalist leaders sacrificed pluralism in favour of a monolithic ideology, geared to promote the development of the country. The various movements were outlawed and persecuted in the name of that nationalist spirit which should have defended their rights. Thus set in a practice that was to bring the system in the direction of authoritarian and corrupt involution. In Egypt the

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8) The Arab names are given in transcription unless simplified as these are welknown in European languages. M. Shaltūt, *Al-Islām 'aqīda wa shar'iyya*, (Islam and Legal Reason) Dār al-Shurūq, Cairo 1992, p. 452; Fahmī Huwaydī believes that in Islam rights and duties are equal for everybody see, *Non Muslim in Muslim Society*, according to Tarik al Bishri the non-Muslim can partecipate to governement in Muslim societies, see in 'Abdelwahab el-Affendi (eds.), *Islam and its Modernity: Essays in Honour of Fathi Osman*, forthcoming; id. I'adat al-Nazar fī 'l-Mafhūm al-Taqlīdī li 'l-Gāmā'at al-Siyāsiya fī 'l-Islām: *Muslim aw Muwātin?*, in *Al-Muwātina wa 'l-Dimūqrātiyya fī 'l-Buldān al-'Arabiyya*, (Citizenship and Democracy in Arab Countries) Markaz Dirāsāt al-Wahda al-'Arabiyya, Beirut, 2001, pp. 55–75.

violent repression following upon the defeat of 1976 drove some of the more extremist fringes of the Muslim Brothers to radical positions, but at the same time it fostered among others a new phase of democratic opening up.

At the end of the 1960s various authoritative scholars in Egypt took a new look at the role played by the Prophet, stressing the revolutionary aspect with the call for justice, equality and freedom contained in his message[9]. Emphasis was placed on the tolerant aspect of Islam in relation to minorities and the relative freedom granted, which had favoured its diffusion.

2. The conditions of the minorities: some examples

Many western scholars pointed out the failure to separate *civitas* and *religio* in the Islamic world, but this is partially wrong if we consider Turkey. The problem, from the western point of view, could be that the Islamic religious culture has not undergone a critical revision as we conceive it in western culture; actually needs to be considered from a different perspective. At the level of the ruling class, there is in effect a powerful convergence of interests between the political and religious authorities, defined as "national interest"; in many respects these fronts are united, combining to resist the demands of the opposition, whether voiced by secular civil society or movements of Islamic inspiration.

In some countries the minorities have been given a degree of political scope; actually, the old role of the translator and mediator of the Ottoman dragoman has been revived, attributing diplomatic functions to Christians, too, as in the case of appointment to vice minister for foreign affairs of Buthros Ghali in Egypt and of Tāriq 'Azīz in Iraq. The situation is rather different in Syria, where a Shiite minority, as mentioned above, is in power and guarantee a fair degree of autonomy for the other religious minorities.

Current scholar like Suad Joseph observes the reconstruction of Lebanon national community consisting of various ethnic and religious

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9) 'A.R. Al-Sharqawī, *Muhammad Rasūl al-hurriya*, al-Hay'a al-Misriyya al-'Amma li 'l-Kitāb, Cairo 1978; on the subject wrote also the famous egyptian intellectuals and writers Tāhā Husayn and 'Abbās Mahmūd al-'Aqqād.

groups is a myth serving to legitimize relations between state and groups of citizens. The citizen is guaranteed as a member of the group, and not as an individual; suffice it to recall that full voting rights for women were achieved only in 1957[10]. An accredited scholar as George Corm believes that it is a question of delayed modernity.

All this goes to show that it is not only a problem of Islam; in this respect the Egyptian intellectual Fahmī Huwaydī remarks that if the citizen does not enjoy rights, it is due to the regulatory choices: in fact, in many Muslim countries the non-residents do not enjoy rights, as is the case with gypsies and the stateless[11]. It is a situation that shows a whole series of endemic conflicts arising from migrations amongst the Arab countries themselves; we may cite, for example, the expulsion of the Egyptians from Iraq and of the Palestinians from Kuwait at the time of the war in 1991. Another emblematic case is that of the workers from Bangladesh in Dubai and other Gulf Emirates, who have practically no civil rights. All that despite the deliberation of the secular human rights bill by the Arab league and that of the Islamic Human Rights approved by the Islamic Community Organization; they both remains unimplemented.

With the failure of the Arab national project, which was to identify the Arab citizen with the Arab state, the sense of belonging to the Islamic Umma (community) and/or dhimma found new life; this bond was consolidated subsequent to the economic crisis of the modern state which, failing to provide social services, had its functions taken over by the religious organizations. In the absence of a social contract the waqf and the denominational institutions set about filling in the gap left by the public institutions. For these reasons the slogan "Islam is the solution" was taken up by the downtrodden, whose existence had only been recognized on the occasion of mass gatherings called by the leaders to approve projects decided upon by the government.

At this stage the non-Muslim religious communities where yet

10) G. Corm, *L'Europe et l'Orient de la Balkanisation à la Libanisation: histoire d'une modernité inaccomplie*, Paris, La Découverte 2002.
11) R. al-Ghannūshī, *Al-Hurriyyāt al-'ammā fī 'l-dawla 'l-Islāmiyyā*, Markaz al-Dirāsāt al-Wahda al-'Arabiyya, Beirut, 1993, 290–1.

further marginalized, in some cases consequently seeking outside support and reference. In the various geographical areas, as a result of particular historical conditions each country developed its own peculiar characteristics, influenced not only by geopolitical but also by cultural conditions. Algeria, for example, is a particular case since French colonial rule first, and then civil conflict, have dramatically penalized the processes of self-government and linguistic autonomy of the autochthonous population of the Imazighen. Institutional emergency was the occasion to postpone response to demands and claims, blocking the natural evolution of the movement in favour of linguistic autonomy and the constitution of a party to defend the rights of that important minority. More or less the same situation arose in Tunisia and Morocco, where, however, at the cultural level the last few years have seen greater scope granted, in terms of language teaching, to the representatives of Imazighen culture[12].

The development and application of rules respecting equal rights for all citizens are the essential precondition for modernization of the state and integration of the minorities.

In the last few years, however, radicalization of relations within the state has given rise to difficulties and conflict between the Islamic fundamentalists and the non-Muslim minorities; suffice it to recall the riots and incidents that took place in Egypt at the end of 2009 and 2010.

3. Revising ideas about the relationship between community and individual within Islam

All this goes to show that a more effective solution is to reformulate certain points in the Charter of Human Rights starting from the needs emerging within Islamic culture regarding individual liberties. One of the crucial points is, in fact, the concept of individual freedom, which needs to be reconsidered in the light of reflection on cultural identity; see, in this connection, the writings of Arkoun and al-Jābirī[13].

Internal postcolonial policy is not always based on social consensus, nor on the institutions of the legally constituted state but, rather, on

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12) P.G.Donini, *Le Minoranze nel Vicino Oriente e nel Maghreb*. P. La Veglia ed., Salerno 1985, pp. 42, 170.
13) *Islam et Laicité*, PISAI 91–2, 1996.

imposition of the interests of small oligarchies: in most of the cases they are still in power, or have only recently been called into question.

According to the Sudanese historian Abdelwahab El-Effendi, what was missing in the transition from the Ottoman state to the modern national state was the possibility of developing the conscience of modern citizen. The elites that took over power in the aftermath of the revolutions—generally military—organized themselves in the form of a single party, also at the expense of the other existing political groupings, as we have seen, but they received no mandate on the part of the citizens. While ostensibly asserting rights and duties for the citizen, in practice the new order did not come to terms on the traditional Islamic mandate (walā') holding between governor and subject; according to El-Effendi, transition was from dawla/umma (state/community) to dawla/watan (state/nation), with no room for the emergence of the figure of the citizen in the sense of mawtin (citizen in the modern sense of the term)[14].

Various other studies dealing with the formation of the Arab national state have pointed out that the birth of the state was not accompanied by recognition of the rights and duties for the citizens to fulfil vis-à-vis the state and vice versa. In relation to this serious shortcoming, the scholar Shaltūt points out, by contrast, that according to the Quran diversities were created for mutual awareness and respect, rights and duties therefore, according to the author, being given us equal for all:

"We created you from a single (pair) of a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that you may know each other (not that you may despise each other). Verily the most honoured of you in the sight of God is (he who is) the most righteous of you"[15].

A point the scholar wishes to stress is that it is not a matter of Islam, since the secular powers have not done any better.

4. Human rights: the state of the debate in various Islamic countries

The very nature of human rights and their specific contents are

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14) 'A. El-Effendi, *I'ādatu 'I-nazar*, cit., pp. 55–75.

15) M. Shaltūt, al-Islam *'Aqida wa sha'riyya*, cit., p. 452; *The Holy Qur'an*, Sura hujurat: 13.

viewed in very different ways in the various Arab countries. The source of their authoritativeness and the purpose they serve have been called into question ever since the proclamation of the UN Charter of Human Rights: more recently the Arab Charter for Human Rights adopted in 2004 was ratifyied in 2008 also by Saudi Arabia and it includes rights for minorities and self-determination. Also Egypt undersigned it but international activist still denounce the violation of these rights as for instance in the case of the violent repression of Muslim convert to another religion.

However, the last few decades have seen an important development: many NGOs, both secular and religious, now make reference to human rights.[16] Reflecting on the phenomenon, the philosopher Sebastiano Maffettone argues the need to start thinking rights anew, comparing various ethical and juridical conceptions in order to formulate a more widely accepted view of human rights[17].

The secular—or, better, military—powers have shown scant concern for the minorities, apart from Syria and Lebanon. Nevertheless, the crisis in relations between the religious and political minorities, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the dominant powers, has led to some further hard thinking.

With regard to the issue under consideration here, Tariq al-Bishri has written an important study on minorities while Hasan Hanafi has developed a new current of thought open to comparison with the UN Charter of Human Rights and developments in South American liberation theology. The Egyptian philosopher has taken a positive approach to the traditional texts, pointing up the principles of social solidarity, human rights, respect and tolerance to be found there. Similar approaches are to be seen in various other texts by Arab intellectuals, both those close to the positions of the Muslim Brothers like the Egyptian Fahmi Huwaidī, and those who take a respectful but rational approach to the faith, as is much the case with the Egyptians Nawal Saadawi and Nasir Abu Zayd, the Tunisian Muhammad Talbi and the

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16) Campanini e Mezran, *I Fratelli Musulmani*, Utet 2010.
17) S. Maffettone, *La pensabilità del Mondo*, (World Thinkability), Il Saggiatore, Milano 2006, p. 74.

Maroccan Fatema Mernissi; finally, running along similar lines but with more secular positions, we find intellectuals like the Algerians Assia Djebbar and Muhammad Arkun, the Libanese Fahima Sharafeddin and the Syrian Sadiq al-Azm, to name but the best known in the West. This fecund ferment of thought, together with wider and higher advances in education, have created conditions for the spread of a culture of rights that the latest generation of concerned Muslims has embraced. So much is attested by the way secular elements and exponents of the minorities have taken part in the peaceful demonstrations of the last spring and in the delegations calling on the governments of many Arab-Islamic countries for more rights and justice.

The situation we have sketched out here is the result of written contributions and debates that have seen the participation of renowned religious and secular leaders on the issue of human rights in general and, in particular, the rights of the minorities. Let us now take a look at the present trends.

5. The debate and the prospects

In the traditional Islamic culture the community has priority over the individual, the latter being defined as believer. In this connection the Syrian philosopher and poet Adonis, commenting on Islamic culture in terms of the current interpretation of the Salafiyya, writes:

"(..) we find in this religious culture no room for the individual personality to be able to move about freely, to confirm or deny, refuse or accept, doubt or believe. Subjectivity is dissolved in the nation community"[18].

The very concept of rules based on the rights of the "citizen" is, in essence, alien to Islamic law; reacting against this practice, Syrian

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18) Adonis, *Beirut. La non -città, trad*. A. Celli, Medusa, Milano, p. 88. The birth of the Salafiyya current is dated to the times of Ibn Taymiyya (14th century); it was eventually taken up again with the work on the modernization of Islam by Muhammad Abduh, advocating, at the end of the 19th century, a return to the purity of the original Islam of the times of the Prophet; what marks out Abduh's approach is its openness to renewal, developed with some of his disciples, cf. H. Lauzière, "The construction of Salafiyya: Reconsidering Salafism from the Perspective of Conceptual History", in *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 42 (2010), 369-389. G. Endress, *Islam. An Historical Introduction*, cit.

philosopher Sadik al-Azm urges the need to found a secular state guaranteeing freedom of opinion for every single citizen. This principle would give equal rights to the minorities, with an approach undreamt of even with the most advanced system of the Ottoman Millet[19].

In principle, the four major schools of Islamic law converge on respect for religious minorities, although at the present state of debate certain points of discrimination persist, including the tax system, access to positions of power, military service and, in some cases, citizenship.

Today, perusing the writings of authoritative experts in religious education such as the popular Imām Yūsuf al-Qardāwī and ʿAbd al-Hamid Kishk, we still find a great deal of limitations to their concept of the legally constituted state[20]. According to al-Qardāwī, it is illogical to hold that Quranic law should prevail in a country where the majority is Muslim, just as in democracies the minorities bow to the decisions of the majority. Moreover, he points out, at this level Islam offers Christians greater guarantees than the secular system[21]. Kishk argues that as Christians theorize separation between state and church, they cannot have access to the centres of political power.

Moroccan ʿAbbās al-Ġarrarī theorizes that the minorities are to be exempt from military service, while Huwaydī holds that they can play

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19) As from the 18th century, with the capitulations, the Christian communities in the Ottoman territory were protected by the foreign powers, acquiring fiscal privileges in trade with them, which gave them an advantage over the Muslims; cf. F.M. Corrao, *La Rinascita Islamica. Il nazionalismo di Muhammad Farīd.* Palermo, Quaderni del Laboratorio Antropologico Universitario, 1985, pp. 10–15. K. Karpat*, The Ottoman State and its Place in World History,* ed. Brill, Leiden, 1974.

20) M.G. Kisk, «Les Minorités dans l'état islamique» in F. Huwaydī, «Des Citoyans, pas des dimmīs», in *Al-Dimma l'Islam et les minorites religieuses*, Etudes Arabes. Dossiers n. 80–1, PISAI, Roma 1991/1–2, pp. 191–201, 233–255. Today applications of these differ in the various Islamic states; even the groups that take reference from the Constitution of Medina give a modern interpretation of them. In the course of history some fortunate cases at times happened under cases and times are recorded during the Abbasid Caliphate (750–1258), but also episodes of persecution, for example the cases mentioned by the poet Ibn Rūmī (836–896).

21) al-Qardāwī, «Un Islam èvolué...ou une évolution musulmane?», in *Islam and Laicité*, 91–2, Roma Pisai, 1996–7, pp. 112–127.

their part in defending the country[22]. However, these positions do not take into account the rights of the single individual, regardless of religious faith or ethnic origins.

In conclusion, in the broader debate on the lines of development of societies of the Middle East and North Africa area, we can today make out at least four major trends: one essentially secular, open to modernization; one of religious conception, proposing a modern, liberal reinterpretation of Islam; another, more conservative one at the religious level, but liberal in economic terms; and, finally, an intransigent minority current associated with an obscurantist approach to the message of the Quran.

Cultural reflections on the issue of minorities

A recent number of the journal IJMES on the condition of minorities in the Arab countries points up the conflicts and tensions. Studies of this type often theorize on the basis of academic sources or second-hand researches, and may present evidence that has little real connection with the social context[23], rarely going into the interactions between the various communities; in countries where freedom of speech is seriously compromised evidence of social life has to be gleaned from the literature.

It is the writers and poets who have dedicated most attention to the subject for a wide readership, aiming to extol the positive aspects of coexistence. For example, the Egyptian poet Ahmad Shawqi chose to set his work "The Andalusian Princess" in a period epitomizing a happy outcome of interreligious relations. More recently the Syrian poet Adonis, too, has written a long poem entitled "Introduction to the History of the Petty Kings", referring to the same historical period, and has dedicated twelve poems to Granada, celebrating the multiplicity of cultural relations. To these authors is also to be added the Palestinian poet, Mahmūd Darwish, who has produced a series of poems on the Andalusian civi-

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22) 'A. al-Ġarrārī, "Pour une vision cohérente des non-musulmans en pays d'Islam, aujourd'hui", in *Al-Dimma l'Islam et les minorites religieuses*, cit. p. 205–13.
23) B. Heyberger, "Eastern Christians, Islam and West: A Connected history", in *Int. Journal of Middle East Studies*, 42 (2010), 475–8.

lization, "Eleven Stars", and the Iraqi poet 'Abd al-Wahhāb al-Bayatī (1926–1999)[24].

It is in the first place the artist who denounce the political exploitation of rivalries between the various religious communities, as has recently been the case of the Egyptian poet Hasan Teleb, dedicating the poem "Brother this is your cross" to the tensions between Muslims and Christians in Egypt[25]. Teleb observes the harmony and correlation existing between people and environment. The poet warns against the risks arising with the widespread tendency to distinguish and separate, bringing out only the negative aspects in contrast between positions. This call is emerging also in the writings of Daisaku Ikeda, is the need to make it clear that nothing can exist in isolation, cut off from other relations. The concept of dependent origin, which extends to the concept of inseparability between life and environment, makes eloquently clear the essential dynamics of life and environment: they are two distinct things, and at the same time always combined. It is a view that leads us to see the issue of relations with minorities within a perspective of interconnection, and not of contraposition. An indication not dissimilar from this is to be found in the Quran, where it is stated:

"Those to whom the Scriptures were given disagreed among themselves through jealousy only after knowledge had been given them"[26].

As Muhammad Shaltūt sees it, equality of rights and duties of Muslims, Christians and Jews is implicit in this verse, and in various other verses of the sacred text.

Fahmī Huwaydī, too, asserts that the fact of belonging to the

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24) 'A. W. Al-Bayyātī, *Love, Death, and Exile*, trans. Bassam K. Frangieh 1990; Adonis, Introduction to the History of the Petty Kings, transl. Bassam Frangieh, in *Journal of Arabic Literature*, vol. 23, No. 1 March 1992; M. Darwīsh, *The Adam of Two Edens: Selected Poems*, edited by Munir Akash and Carolyn, Syracuse University Press and Jusoor, 2000.
25) H: Teleb, *Voici Karbala'*, transl. T. Camelia Sobhi, Ein For Human and Social Studies, Cairo, 2005; The poem mentioned here "Brother this is your cross" is unedited, my translation is in print in Italian in, *Poesia e Spiritualità*.
26) *The Holy Quran*, Sura 3: 19 M. Shaltūt, *Al-Islām 'aqīda wa shara'iyyah*, Cairo, Dār al-Shurūq 1992, p. 452.

modern state makes all the citizens equal before the law regardless of faith, as already upheld in Islam[27].

Clearly, then, the principle of respect for the citizen and minorities emerges in both religious and secular discussion; the problem of conflict, as Teleb warns in his recent poem, arises elsewhere, and it is in this further dimension that the causes are to be sought. Why, we ask, is respect for minorities neglected, and how are we to remedy the exclusion of an element present in itself at both the religious and institutional levels? What are the mechanisms through which in the modern Arab State, where there may or may not be a constitution in place, it is the religious dictates that prevail, human rights being travestied or neglected to give precedence now to one interest, now to another?

In the last few decades the findings of Arab sociologists have shown that the issue of rights is connected with that of citizenship, the social contract, and the systematic violation of the rights of man. In a recent conference the Bishop of Algiers suggested the possibility that the crisis in relations between the religious communities arose from an underlying political cause, pointing out that in any case, in order to overcome conflict between the various religious communities and between West and East, it is indispensable to start from the level of information and education, changing the sectarian contents of schoolbooks in both the cultural areas.

As a basis for reform of rules and regulations and definition of a social pact there must be the conviction that every human being is as such worthy of respect; in fact, human rights are also a matter of protecting the weak from the overwhelming power of the majority. With the emergence of a more liberal individualistic temperament the very nature of social life will be transformed. In reconciling the positions of people holding creeds, who see in religion the possibility for the development of the individual's spiritual nature, secularism has failed to develop the third fundamental value emerging with the French Revolution, namely brotherhood. The problem facing a culture which defends the rights of the group, as Islamic culture tends to in the Salafite trend, is to tackle the isolation of the individual which leads to the development of that

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27) cit., F. Huwaydī, *Non Muslim in Muslim Society*, p. 58.

excessive selfishness that emerges in Western society characterized by economic liberalism. Again, from the eastern point of view, as Ikeda observes, the worry is that ethnic and religious differences are so readily distinguished that they may eventually be approached in absolute terms, with the fundamental error of attributing all the problems to these differences. From Bosnia to the Western Sahara, and as far as Sudan, we see how exaggerated nationalism can lead to the outbreak of violent episodes of xenophobia and racism, as indeed can excessive stretching of the concept of self-determination.

Broadly speaking, growing attention is being paid to these issues and the ongoing debate cannot be simplified or reduced to commonplaces. Awareness of the phenomena, their complexity and the forms they take, is to be cultivated, constituting the necessary basis for harmonious, common development.

In conclusion, the issues to be addressed from both the religious and the secular point of view for integration of the minorities and modernization of the state are: recognition of the cultural and linguistic rights of the ethnic and religious minorities, with consequent reform of the educational system and school textbooks in order to develop a mentality respectful of the rights of others. As we have seen there are good principles and positive ideas but these will be useless unless implemented in daily life. At the beginning of this year we have witnessed revolutions spreading all over the Arab world; the media showed the maturity of the demonstrators, people, regardless from their religious or ethnic belonging, ask for freedom and justice.

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The Question of Minority Rights in Arab Countries, is a Religious or a National Issues?

Francesca Maria Corrao

Ikeda writes: "Religion can be the base for a philosophy of coexistence that allows humanity to face and overcome the evils threatening its own existence"[1].

Around the world, the question of how states deal with rights is an important and sensitive issue. Particularly, in these last years the question of diversities and minorities arise as a crucial factor for peace in Arab countries.

The "Pakistan solution" is a historical example of such a situation. We wonder if partition is the sole solution. After the Sudan referendum, it could seem as if Islam is not able to give peaceful solutions to demands of minorities.

In this paper starting from Ikeda's point of view, I will try to understand if the crisis is due to religious or national thought and if there is the possibility for a non-violent solution to the problem compatible with existing local discourses.

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1) From the "2011 Peace Proposal"