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Awakening in the spring, democracy in the autumn? Why Islam and democracy are compatible

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Awakening in the spring, democracy in the autumn? Why Islam and democracy are compatible

Bonn, 31 October 2011. Many people believe Islam and democracy to be as compatible as fire and water. Not at all, in other words. Or at least only to a limited extent. The German public, for example, is currently worried about the role of religious parties after the Arab Spring. How moderate in fact is the Islamist Ennahda Party in Tunisia? What is its position on the separation of religion and state? Is it likely to nip Tunisian democracy in the bud after the elections? Anything new gives rise to uncertainty. Scepticism and anxiety are therefore understandable. And yet it is surprising that the scepticism primarily concerns religion, and this in Germany of all countries: the governing party here is, after all "Christian", and the preamble to the Basic Law, Germany's constitution, commits the country to responsibility before God. Now, the reader may object that, in this respect, Islam is completely different from Christianity. But that is one of three mistakes commonly heard in the public debate on religion and democracy. Neither is Islam per se incompatible with democracy, nor is Christianity always the better option. And a strict separation of state and religion is hard to find in any political system – least of all in the established democracies of Europe.

Why no religion is better for democracy than any other

No religion is in itself better or worse than any other when it comes to the emergence and stability of democracy. Every religion is as compatible with a system based on the principle of liberty and with the universal rights of man as its interpretation by the faithful and their actions permit. Christianity and Islam, for example, are not static quantities, but dynamic belief systems. They materialise and change with the passage of time and assume different forms in different regions of the world. Thus, although a Catholic mass with its voodoo elements in Haiti's Port au Prince follows a liturgy similar to that of a church service in Germany's provincial Bavaria, the political roles of religious dignitaries differ in the two countries.

This is evident from their processes of democratisation. While Catholic priests in Haiti turned to liberation theology in the early 1990s and mobilised the faithful in their communities for the cause of democracy, the Catholic church in post-World War II Germany tended to take a lukewarm view of democracy. This was even truer of Germany's Protestant church. For fear of a repetition of the Weimar period in German history, which led to the Nazi regime in 1933, many clerics opposed parliamentary democracy and, in their internal debates, advocated the introduction of a constitutional monarchy. It was to be the 1950s before a majority of West German Protestants were able to adopt a position that was pragmatic and compatible with West Germany's democratic institutions. The German experience shows that religious organisations are able to adjust to the democratic system, confront it and influence it without doing it any lasting damage.

Why there is no inconsistency between democracy and Islam

The compatibility of Islam and democracy is a fact. A total of 475 million Muslims live in the democracies of India, Indonesia and Turkey alone. Five countries in which Muslims make up the majority of the population are democracies: Albania, Indonesia, Mali, Senegal and Turkey. During the democratisation processes of the 1990s the political regimes of a further twelve countries with majority Muslim populations opted for a liberal path. Like predominantly Christian countries (such as Nicaragua and Zambia), they also include some, Niger and Bosnia-Herzegovina, for instance, whose democratisation processes are in stagnation. However, the trends of the past 20 years do not allow of any conclusions as to the particular democracy-friendliness of a given religion. Religious actors support and obstruct the erosion of authoritarianism and the establishment of democratic regimes to varying degrees. The two largest Muslim organisations in Indonesia, for example, played a key part in the fall of the

Suharto regime in 1998. In such countries as Albania and Mali, where representatives of Muslim organisations were barred or co-opted by the state, their contribution to democratisation was, on the other hand, vanishingly small. These examples also demonstrate that the supposed incompatibility of Islam and democracy does not exist. Not least is this true of the Arab region, long considered the most stable bastion of autocracy. Recent events in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen and Syria confirm that the desire for freedom in no way depends on a people's religious inclination.

What matters in the separation of state and religion

Once autocracy has been renounced, a secular order is usually regarded as a precondition of democracy. Many expect, for instance, the Arab Spring to be capable of changing into democracy only if religion and state are strictly separated. Yet that is not in any way reflected by the realities of most democracies in this world. In Sweden Protestantism was not abolished as the state religion until 2002, in Germany the state administers the

church tax, and in Turkey it is responsible for the training of clerics. But despite – or perhaps because of – this, democratic regimes continue to exist in those countries. Of greater importance for the emergence and consolidation of a democracy is that political and religious institutions respect each other and interact in accordance with democratic rules. This is illustrated by democratisation processes that have occurred across all religions and denominations since the early 20th century. In the long term the institutionalised representation of the interests of religious groups in a political system is conducive to democracy rather than an obstacle in its path. This also holds true for religious political parties that are guided by free democratic constitutional values. It now remains to be seen whether religiously motivated parties change the Arab Spring into a democratic autumn.

More on this subject in the next Current Column, "Why Islam is not an obstacle to democracy in North Africa", on Monday, 7 November 2011.



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