Bismil-lâhi ar-Rahmani ar-Rahim

Being Muslim in Spain today means being a member of a religious minority in a country with very little development of religious freedoms, a democratic country that just got out of almost five hundred years of religious monopoly imposed by force, a long period in which Islam has been brutally persecuted and officially presented as enemies of the homeland. Being a Muslim in Spain means to be a member of a religion composed mostly of immigrants in social exclusion, who maintain strong ties with their countries of origin, some of which are political regimes in which Islam is the state religion. Finally, being a Muslim in Spain is to be a member of a religion that is being attacked constantly, in the context of globalization and international geopolitics.

In a few sentences we have mentioned a number of elements whose particular analysis is rather complex, encompassing historical, legal, political (national and international), social and cultural, not to mention the strictly religious aspects. Each of these aspects would require at least a specific conference to be developed in full. In this opening chapter we will attempt to provide a comprehensive picture of what it means to be Muslim in Spain in the twenty-first century, from a holistic perspective, taking into account local and global issues, the weight of the past and the question of identity, issues that we know are interrelated.

We will not talk about the personal experience that a Muslim can have about their religion, what it means to be Muslim, whether in Spain or China. If we did, we would have to say that being Muslim means to live in wonder, devoted and giving oneself to the Creator of heaven and earth, we should have to say that involves knowing to be the caliph of God on earth, caretaker of the world, here and now. We should explain that being Muslim means following a sharia, a guide, and take a series of values... We should say that being Muslim, in Spain or wherever, is a spiritual choice, extending one’s gaze and release the weight from the mundane, to open up to the vast land of Allah ... In short, Im afraid we would end up writing a book on religion and not about the meaning of the return of Islam to al-Andalus. So we will not focus on religion itself, but in the context in which it develops: Spain at the beginning of the 21st century.

Our intention is to put on the table a number of issues that we consider crucial to understand the internal problems of Muslim communities, characterized broadly by social instability, the failure of their religious rights, the legal inequality respect to the religion of the majority, Islamophobia, the persistence of national Catholicism. And internally, because of the internal fragmentation, poor preparation of most religious leaders and imams, ideological rivalries, the advance of Salafi currents and foreign interference. All this in the context of
globalization, in which immigrants maintain close ties with their countries of origin, a global context characterized by the constant flow of information, in which what happened in the other side of the planet can affect our daily lives. The issues are many, and I will try to go over them quickly.

Among these issues, the public opinion only seems interested in everything that makes reference to fundamentalism or violence, or what signals the presence of Islam as a threat to the identity of the area, either Spain or any region with a developed national consciousness. But the fact is that these are issues that cannot be separated, to the point that the success of Salafism or fundamentalism among certain Muslim groups is in many ways the result of the other.

The situation I am about to describe may seem dramatic, but we note that is also characterized by the force and aspirations of more than one million Muslims, men and women who aspire to a decent life, being largely in favor of a positive integration of Islam in the secular space, advocating the adoption of democratic values and consensus, without having to renounce their beliefs or their cultural particularities, in the case of immigrants.

1. **First, we must mention the social precariousness.**

Being a Muslim in Spain puts us as part of a group composed mainly of immigrants, with all that instability and social unrest that implies. Spain is the fourth country in the EU in number of Muslims, with about a million and a half, mostly from immigration. 80% from the Maghreb, and the rest from the Middle East, Pakistan, Senegal, Mali and Nigeria especially, not to mention the cities of Ceuta and Melilla, and the generation born in Spain. There is also a significant number of converts, which they say around 50,000, but these figures are mere hypotheses. Some 350,000 are in Madrid and some in Catalonia. Andalusia is the third community in the number of Muslims, followed by the Region of Murcia.

Most Muslims living in Spain come from immigration, in a country unaccustomed to diversity, and with a level of social development well below other European countries with a high rate of immigrants. As we know, the immigrant population is subject to a series of different legal rules than the rest of the citizenry. The Aliens Act and the set of special rules for foreign people deny or trim their rights and subject to discriminatory treatment people based on their national origin. This discrimination is especially severe against those who are undocumented. At the end of the day this means that the power turn immigrants into citizens with lower legal and social level, allowing in many cases their exploitation.

This will surely affect the experience of Islam by the Muslims in Spain. This social insecurity helps to explain the low level of organization of Muslims in Spain.

2. **As a second element, being a Muslim in Spain puts us in the position of having to answer all the negative discourses through which Islam is presented as an enemy of the West. I refer, of course, to Islamophobia.**

There is a proliferation of speeches in which Islam is equated with violence, totalitarianism and discrimination against women. Alarmingly, the penetration of these speeches in the
programs of democratic parties, on the pretext of promoting the "national" preference in front of immigrant groups is common. This climate of general suspicion leads to all kinds of discrimination, such as social rejection, the difficulties in obtaining housing or employment discrimination. At the same time, this Islamophobia acts as a constraint to the institutions and make the Spanish Muslims find increasingly difficult to open places of worship and perform other practices associated with their religion.

We are witnessing the creation of a culture of violence, in which the Muslims appear to be contrary to the western values. We must be aware of the nature of Islamophobia, which is merely an update of the classic European anti-Semitism. Each and every one of the elements of classical European Judeophobia have a correspondence in Islamophobia. This is the same anti-Semitism, but with a renewed object of hatred, with Muslims occupying the role of the other unassimilable, who refuses to give up their identities to plunge into the flock.

Islamophobia is the fascism of the 21st century, a real threat to democracy. Islamophobia is a psycho-social disease, the same group as other similar diseases, such as racism, xenophobia or Judeophobia. This group of diseases is known with the generic name of fascism, and is based on hatred of the other, understood as an outside entity and dangerous, with particular values, strange and contagious, threatening society. Islamophobia, like other variants of fascism, always prepares the conditions for the extermination of the group who is demonized.

3. Being a Muslim in Spain puts us in tension with a certain conception of Spain, linked to national-Catholic myths, in which the Andalusian characteristics have been excluded. We find the persistence of national Catholicism, who raises under the neoconservative umbrella of the clash of civilizations.

All items are mentioning us back to a painful but undeniable social reality: the presence of Islam in Spain generates resistance among broad sectors of the population, acting as a brake to the normalization of religious pluralism and leading Muslims to stand at margins of society. Often, this resistance to accept the presence of Islam is linked to a certain conception of Spanish identity. This resistance also exist in other European countries, but Spain has very specific connotations, I would be tempted to say very Spanish."

This discourse claims that Islam is foreign to Spanish identity, that Muslims living in the Peninsula for eight centuries were foreigners, that Al Andalus is a damn time in which the "real Spain" was cornered in the mountains of Asturias, from where they began a glorious reconquista. Don Pelayo, Santiago Matamoros and El Cid Campeador come back as exponents of the eternal Spain.

We cannot overlook the ultimate meaning of this connection between the past and present, as if it was bound to repeat itself. The presence of Islam in the twenty-first century Spain is presented as a reminiscence of the "Muslim invasion" of Visigoth Hispania. When justifying the Inquisition and the expulsion of the Moors on the grounds that Spain was at war with Islam and that these were a "fifth column", it is inevitable to draw a parallel with the current situation, where is common to hear that we are at "war against Islam" and that Muslim citizens are a "fifth column" threatening the Spanish identity. The expulsion or
extermination emerges as the final solution to ensure the return to a "ideal" Spain of the ancestors.

If I insisted on this point is because this is a reality that we face as Spanish Muslims, and because these discourses have a real and continuing impact on our lives, creating a mental and ideological breakthrough, in which the Spanish is assimilated to the Catholic, and Islam appears as its opposite. By joining the persistence of national Catholicism to the growing Islamophobia, and we add up the reticence with regard to immigration, it seems understandable that Muslims have every reason to fear the worst.

4. Connected to this: being Muslim in Spain involves acknowledging being heir of Andalusian culture.

I just pronounced this sentence and I realize that in fact it cannot be applied to most Muslims living in Spain. I do not think a Gambian immigrant who works in the field cares much about Andalusian culture, and even is possible that they may not even be aware that in the Iberian Peninsula for centuries Islam was the majority religion. However, this presentation would not be complete without a reference to this part of our collective memory.

In relation to the history of Spain, we must be aware of the urgency of an inclusive narrative, a narrative in which the reference to the presence of Islam in medieval Spain seems inevitable. Willem Frijhoff is director of the project How to create a Dutch collective identity that recognizes the different cultures living in the Netherlands. According to him, multicultural and assimilationist models are exhausted, and now the trend is towards a third model, which he describes as participatory, but in Spain we call it inter-cultural.

It is all about working on a social reality to create a bridge, both at the discursive and symbolic level. In this line, says Willem Frijhoff within this paradigm is essential that "the second and third generations of immigrants can identify with the host countrys history."

Frijhoff appeals the development of a cultural canon: anything that a group of people must know and feel to be perceived as parts of a collective project. This involves applying modern techniques of conflict resolution, seeking to put differences over the basic elements that create a union.

Under the current circumstances, with the tension of the new Muslim immigration growing, it would be almost suicidal to give up the integrative potential of Al-Andalus.

********

So far we have mentioned external factors -social, political, historical and cultural- that impede the normalization of the presence of Islam in our society: social insecurity, violation of rights, legal inequality with respect to the majority religion, Islamophobia and the persistence of national Catholicism.

Now we must refer to intra-Islamic difficulties, such as fragmentation of communities, the lack of a minimally serious leadership, foreign interference and the spread Salafism and other Islamic discourses that break with society. For it is clear that not all problems of the Muslims in Spain come from outside, and that Muslim communities have not found the
appropriate mechanisms to facilitate their integration.

5. Being a Muslim in Spain is to belong to a group with a very weak organization, job insecurity that manifests in the institutional and poor preparation of many imams and Islamic leaders.

We have already mentioned the link between the organizational precariousness and social exclusion of immigrant Muslim groups. This lack of preparation occurs in all levels, regarding religion in the case of many imams, and in terms of knowledge of the Spanish law by many Islamic leaders. It is not about generalizing, but to put on the table one of the major domestic problems of Muslim communities, which hinders miserably their normal development. Often they are precisely the people in positions of community leadership that hinder this development.

The inability of many Islamic leaders is related to unfamiliarity with the environment in which they move. They aim to implement in Spain models of organization from other societies, finding them ineffective when responding to the new situation. Sometimes the demands are unrealistic. One example will be enough. Earlier we cited the failure of the right to be buried according to Islam. As an example of a negotiation frustrated because of the intransigent attitude of a Muslim group, we can cite the case of Vitoria. The City offered a municipal cemetery plot, including the construction of a sink and a mosque. However, the agreement was not signed because the Islamic community demanded the opening of a door in the wall of the churchyard wall, so that the bodies of dead Muslims would not have to enter through the same door as the rest. Since the cemetery is listed as national heritage (and the request itself is insulting), the request was rejected. In this case, we find that a willingness by the City to find a solution clashes with the bigoted views of the Islamic community, preventing an optimal agreement for Muslims.

In this subsection we should mention the cases of many imams who have generated sterile and counterproductive controversy to the interests of Muslims. I am referring to cases like the imam who refused to be interviewed by a presenter, because it was Ramadan and she wore makeup. No doubt, the most covered case by the media was that of the imam of the mosque in Fuengirola, Mustafa Kamal, who was sentenced for inducing abuses towards women. This imam has even said that he is "one of two authorized persons in the Spanish state to interpret the Quran." This has inflicted serious injury to all Muslims, we know that in Islam there is no priestly caste or institution holding this mission.

In a broader sense, there is a crisis of both authority and representation, with the predominance of conservative leaders who are supported by institutions, living with their backs to the real needs of Muslims. Unfortunately, both the Spanish government and some autonomous communities consistently support conservative Islamic currents, in both right and left governments. When I speak of the support of reactionary Islam by institutions I mean the promotion and financing of its leadership. Why? I cannot answer the question, I just can make a risky assumptions. First, because the reactionary sectors provide appropriate religious structure, an institutionalization of Islam which is easy to negotiate with. Second, because they are not rights demanders, and indeed are usually positioned on the side of the institutions against the interests of Muslims themselves. This has been evident in the whole
issue of opening of mosques. Third, because these religious structures count with the support of certain foreign countries.

6. And this leads us to the next topic: Being Muslim in Spain involves being part of a religious community heavily fragmented, which must assume the foreign interference and ideological control by conservative currents.

On the one hand, there is an attempt to ideologically control immigrants from certain countries of origin. This is clearly the case of Morocco, who is afraid of the freedom of thought enjoyed by Moroccans in Spain, and it is trying by all possible means to control these associations. This is problematic as these networks controlled by the country of origin will find it very difficult to respond to the needs of Muslims in Spain. And this is exactly what is happening. At this point, interference adds up to the little preparation of leaders, which leads to total paralysis. There are Muslim religious institutions in our country that are supported by the State or the autonomous communities, but whose mission is not to encourage the development of the rights of Muslims, but to ensure that they do not deviate doctrinally, by the standards of foreign countries.

At this point I want to introduce a distinction. When we talk about foreign interference we are not demonizing the fact that home governments maintain a relationship with immigrant communities, nor the bilateral relations between these countries and Spain. When we speak about interference we refer to interventions that seek to control immigrants based on local agendas, and that hinder the normal development of Islam in Spain.

We cannot deny that for many years there has been a real struggle to control the Islamic discourse in Europe. In most Muslim countries there are some religious institutions linked to the state, imposing their vision of Islam and restricting freedom of interpretation and thought, with the pretext of avoiding the fundamentalist speech. This organizational Islam or State Islam is presented as the antidote to fundamentalism, but it remains deeply reactionary, especially as regards of the status of women. In Europe a vision of Islam independent of these structures of power could emerge, an Islam of progress, committed to social justice and human rights. To avoid this, countries such as Saudi Arabia, which spends huge amounts of money to control Islam and indoctrinate Muslims in a reactionary vision of Islam, in many ways incompatible with the values of our society.

7. Being a Muslim in Spain involves witnessing the growth of fundamentalism and Salafism, especially among youngsters.

The current situation generates internal dynamics of resentment within communities: the breakdown of social ties, disaffection and disinterest towards the culture of the host society and identity reactions. Salafism offers many young Muslims in Europe a response to the uprooting, it gives a strong identity in a society that refuses them (or so they think). Islam offers in this situation a strong counter-identity that is playing in certain areas a key role as a factor of cohesion within the community outside the dominant ideology. This is multiplied because of the international situation: Palestine, Iraq, Chechnya, Kashmir ... We are finding dynamics on closing identity, the clearest symptom of which is drawing a mental border between the values of Islam and the values of the dominant culture. Put simply: if you are
Muslim you cannot be Western, and vice versa.

This identity discourse is built in opposition to the values of Western society, considered as entirely corrupt and an enemy of Islam. An Islam designed in a rigid and dogmatic way, which emphasizes the normative aspects and moves away the contents. Its a very simple speech, spread through preachers and audiovisual tapes that allow many young people socially or culturally uprooted to feel integrated into a virtual community of believers. We entered a vicious circle. The stronger national identity discourses are calling on Muslims to assimilate, the strongest the attraction of the Salafi discourse has for many of these groups. In extreme cases, this Salafi response can lead to violence. The neo-liberal model itself and the dominant anti-Islamic discourse generates these dynamics, makes them inevitable and at the same time takes advantage of them, with the exploitation of undocumented workers, the increase in the allocations of resources for security and the establishment of a general climate of suspicion about Muslims.

8. All this leads us to address the legal situation: being Muslim in Spain involves being a member of a religious minority in a country with little development of religious pluralism, in which most institutions ignore the religious rights of Muslims.

We are talking about the breach of religious rights of Muslims by the state, regional governments and municipalities in general, but also schools, prisons and hospitals. When we speak of violation of rights we should clarify that we do not mean communitarian claims, but the Spanish laws themselves. The Islamic Commission of Spain signed the Cooperation Agreement Law with the state in 1992, which recognized a number of rights to the Muslims in Spain:

- Status of Islamic religious leaders and imams.
- Islamic religious assistance in the army, prisons, hospitals and public institutions.
- Legal protection of mosques and places of worship.
- Attribution of civil effects to the marriage celebrated according to Islamic religious rite.
- Religious education in public schools and private schools that receives public funds from the State.
- Tax benefits for certain assets and activities of the communities belonging to the Islamic Commission of Spain.
- Commemoration of Islamic religious festivals.
- Regulation of Islamic burials and cemeteries.
- Registering the hallmark of Halal food and its availability in public centers.
- Participation of the Islamic Commission of Spain in the preservation and promotion of Islamic historical and artistic heritage.

Sixteen years after the law was passed, it is obvious that Muslims have many difficulties in exercising these rights, so that we can say that the development of the religious freedom of Muslim citizens is in a precarious situation, even worse than in 1992, due to increase of the number of followers. We enjoy a proper legal framework, but not the tools nor the political will to develop it. We find that one thing is to state certain rights and quite another to ensure compliance.
Later we will analyze the reasons for this failure. We advance several factors: the lack of willingness by the state, progressing at snails pace when not simply retreating. The absolute lack of culture of religious pluralism in Spain, which manifests itself almost grotesque when one must deal with certain institutions. The weight of five hundred years of Catholic religion weighs like a stone. To accommodate to the new reality of the country there must be changes, to adapt the laws to the new religious pluralism. Any change generates resistance, and even more when involves a point so sensitive as that of religion, considered by some as the quintessence of the nation. Thus, developing religious freedom is presented as an anti-patriotic act and an attempt to undermine Spain's Catholic identity.

But not everything can be blamed on the state or institutions: among the reasons for the lack of development of the religious rights of Muslims is the very disunity of communities and the failure of their leaders, who seem more concerned to appear in the picture with the Minister and receiving the grant of the day, not for fighting for the rights of Muslims. We will return later to this, insha Allah.

9. This leads to the final point that should be mentioned, that of legal inequality with respect to the majority religion.

The current financing system of the Catholic Church violates the principles of nondiscrimination and equality of all citizens before the law regardless of religion, basic principles expressed in the Spanish Constitution and the Organic Law of Religious Freedom. We find a system of privileges contrary to secularism, which should ensure equal treatment of different religions, and has a negative effect on democratic normality, even hindering inter-religious coexistence.

Thanks to the funding received from the State, the Catholic Church maintains influential media, in which the defamation of Islam is constant. Public funds are used for the maintenance of thousands of priests, temples and charities linked to the Church, some of which are involved (in secret) to the evangelization of the Muslim immigrants.

Only a small fraction of the amount the Episcopal Conference receives corresponds to the tax allocation that the faithful attributed to their religion by the share of their tax declaration. The rest comes from the coffers of various ministries - Education and Culture, Defense, Health, Labor and Social Affairs, and the budgets of the equivalent ministries of the regional governments. The strength of Spanish Catholicism, measured by priests and nuns, bishops and other hierarchies, in money or in real estate, and in educational, social and charity services, is unparalleled because it thrives on complex and sometimes inscrutable mechanisms private income and, above all, funding and public grants. Separate chapter is direct subsidies or grants to the Church for its vast artistic heritage and real estate: 280 museums, 130 cathedrals and nearly a thousand monasteries. Only enforcement of judgments concerning the Catholic religion teachers, the Ministry of Education and Science has spent almost 112 million euros. This is in addition to EUR 63.1 million for faculty salaries.

A whole apparatus of power that does not hesitate to exercise any kind of coercion to favor the imposition of the doctrine to non-Catholics, as we saw in the cases of gay marriage or
abortion. For years Muslims have been demanding a transition to democracy on religious pluralism. Today, the principles of a secular state (Establishment Clause), equality and non discrimination between religions are not respected, even though these are the pillars of a democratic system. Undoubtedly, the solution is to end the privileges of the Catholic Church and strengthen secularism, understood as a living space, in which all religions have equal treatment.

**Conclusions**

After this presentation, appears obvious that the overall picture is not very encouraging. The vast majority of Muslims living in Spain are citizens who want to live normal lives, work and watch their families grow. However, social insecurity, prejudice and lack of respect for their rights hamper their normal development as citizens. In all these areas very specific tension occurs, refers to a potential or actual conflict, more or less latent or developed, but in any case could explode under certain circumstances, as we have seen in the past in Almeria or Terrassa. The interrelationship of these tensions is explosive, and urges us to a serious and positive decision on the integration of Islam in the secular space.

It all leads to ask the question: what can we do? As I have no power in this regard, I will not hesitate to give my opinion:

1. Take measures to ensure the full development of the religious rights of Muslims. The social integration of any group needs allowing access to their rights, the full exercise of citizenship.
2. Advancing secularism and equality of all citizens, which means the revision of the Organic Law on Religious Freedom (which actually is no such thing, but a law of religious minorities) and the abrogation of the agreements with the Vatican, as it constitutes a separate status that grants privileges to some citizens over others.
3. Combating Islamophobia, through awareness campaigns at all levels, especially within the state apparatus.
4. Recover the historical memory of al-Andalus as an integrating factor.
5. Promote the Islam readings in line with the values that give cohesion to our society, such as democracy, freedom of conscience, social justice and gender equality.

As I noted at the beginning, the difficulties faced by Muslim communities can only be countered by taking advantage or, better, bringing into play the strength and the desire for more than a million Muslims, men and women living in Spain who aspire to a decent life, being mostly in favor of a positive integration of Islam in the secular space, advocated in the adoption of democratic values and consensus, without having to renounce either their beliefs or their cultural particularities, in the case of immigrants.

Basically, it comes to exploring the entire range of possibilities offer to us by the rule of law and democracy to achieve the dominance of an Islam away from any form of extremism, while fighting Islamophobia, religious freedom is developed and works to develop a reading of the history of Spain inclusive of diversity. There is no doubt that democracy offers an ideal framework for the development of the internal potential of Islamic spirituality, which leads us to the emergence of an Islam of progress, democratic and committed to religious pluralism, gender equality and social justice. The spread and consolidation of Islamic spirituality of any ideology is a favored mechanism for a positive normalization of the presence of Islam. At this point we realize all that Islam can contribute to our society. From the perspective of a Spanish Muslim committed to achieving a democratic and egalitarian Islam in Spain,
this is not a matter of opinion but a matter of survival. Unfortunately, this is not the general trend, and both the rise of Salafism and the support of reactionary Islam by institutions is a reality among us.

References:
• Cabrera, Hashim: various articles in digital format: Culture and secularism in contemporary society, the conflict of the imams, memory and cultural identity in contemporary Andalusia, Emergency, grandeur and misery of globalization, Spain and Islam. In www.webislam.com
• Roy, Olivier, Globalized Islam. Ediciones Bellaterra. Barcelona 2003
• Sardar, Ziauddin. Desperately Seeking Paradise. Ed Gedisa
• Cabrera, Hashim: several articles apeared on digital format: (Cultura y laicidad en la sociedad contemporánea; El conflicto de los imames; Memoria e identidad cultural en la Andalucía contemporánea; Emergencia, grandeza y miseria de la globalización; España y el islam.) In www.webislam.com


--- ¿Es el Gobierno rehén de la jerarquía católica? El País, 27/05/2008.

Translated by Daniel F. Rivera

Original text