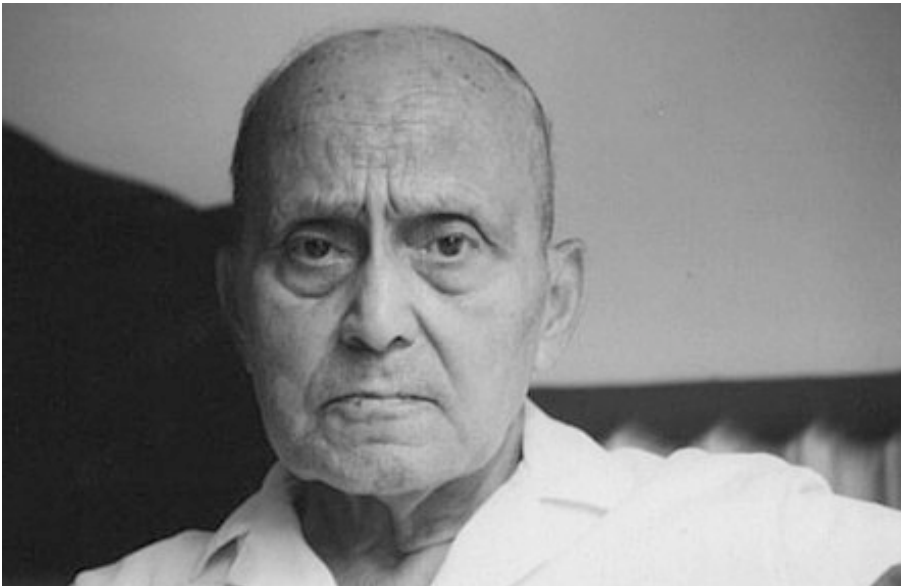


INTERVIEW WITH MOHAMED TALBI

Lina Lazaar

1 June 2011



Ibraaz: What is your mission as a historian and Muslim scholar?

Mohamed Talbi: I am an historian and I therefore do not wish to make any statement in the name of Islam because I do not hold the mandate to do so. In fact, no one is in a position to claim infallibility to tell or hold the Truth.

I shall, however, say that I am leading a fight against the rigid and conservative interpretation of the Quranic

text. The prevailing conservative interpretation of the Quran is not the only one available to us. According to Abu Hanifa, in 150 Hegira, God does not only speak to the dead but also to the Living. [1] If his words are alive, as mentioned in the Hadith, then we are compelled to '[r]ead the Quran as if it has been revealed to you'. This would imply that I have to listen to it with today's spirit, in my very present situation, and interpret it as such.

This is very much part of the dynamic interpretation of the Quran that I want to advocate. I prefer it over a conservative and static reading that tends to prescribe and over-determine the orality or 'speech' of the text. I want to give that speech back to God, against those who have monopolised it and pretend to be the only infallible speakers. If I were in front of God, I would tell him: 'This is how I understood your words. I did my best to understand you. It is now up to you to judge the sincerity of my approach.'

The injunction here is to read the Quran with your eyes. There are several possible interpretations of the Quran yet only one text. This leads us to evoke the right to be different. All sects and modern movements are the result of various interpretations of the Quran. Some justify violence and legitimise it by rejecting pluralism



and the right to be different. And these are precisely the ones I condemn. Hence, it is essential to reach with pen and ink, rather than blood, a cultural space that banishes violence and intellectual terrorism. A space which allows an evolution of the Quran, or at least an interpretation that is compatible with the evolution of the society or an Ijtihad. [2]

I: The Muslim community or Ummah seems to be torn between two ideological positions: a secular tendency from one side and a conservative tendency on the other.[3] Do you think there is hope for a possible political unity to emerge from such tendencies and the tensions associated with *sharia*?

MT: The Ummah has been at the centre of political clashes. Some Islamic movements use *sharia* in a limited, literalist manner which does not take into consideration the exigencies of the present. They tend to instrumentalise history and build up a series of chimeras that often violently interfere with those who live in today's world.

However, 50 per cent of the Muslim community belongs to the diaspora, namely, minorities living in their countries of origin such as Russia, India, Germany or England. With such diversity, which surely can become only more complex with time, how could one realistically aspire to an Islamic political unity or sense that one voice can speak for all? We should reject the desire that society must be governed by the sacred text, and concentrate, instead, on the nature of its reading. The Quran is not politics. It is neither a Constitution nor a code of behaviour. It is Light and the Source of Inspiration that is viable at every moment of time and life.

Islam is, first and foremost, a secular religion where the people are sovereign not the rulers. It is interpretations of the *sharia* that has spread chaos and strife. We must, therefore, get rid of the lies before being able to understand the foundations of the Muslim faith and Islamic thought. The *sharia* is man-made invention. In fact, the terms *sharia* or indeed 'politics' do not belong to the Quranic lexicon and is nowhere to be found.

I: If Islam is a secular religion, does this mean that there could be cohabitation between democratic ideologies and Islamic values?

MT: The term democracy does not exist in the Quran, which is quite normal. Democracy is a new-born political management method, which has recently been considered the best or 'the least' worst in our societies. The term, *Shu'ra*, however exists in the Quran. It is a generic term that means 'consultation' or 'dialogue' which does not necessarily relate to any specific political system but to life as a whole. *Shu'ra* means to assess the rights and wrongs before making any decision, be it in the family, nation, or humanity as a whole.[4] The *Sh'ura* ensures different kinds of freedom, including bodily freedom, freedom of expression, and the freedom of justice for all as well as social cohesion. This is the kind of Islam I defend. Dictatorship is, by definition, an abuse and a denaturalisation of the Quranic message. In addition, fighting for freedom is a must for the Muslim. Freedom is not a gift; it is an eternal struggle for justice and freedom that is never completely won.

I: How can we further explain the political regimes in place in the Arab world presently, not to mention their



underlying forms of dictatorship and despotism?

MT: Dictatorship is only a social phenomenon and one that is by no means encouraged, as I have argued, by the Quran. It is not a religious notion of Islam, nor is it an ideal of Islam. And yet why is the Arab world still in a situation of international embarrassment and ignominy? The answer is that it has chosen since the nineteenth century to walk backwards rather than engage with modernity.

I: So what is, in your opinion, comprises the road to modernity?

MT: Quran is modernity. The Muslim world or *Ummah* needs to free itself from the historical and ossified magma of narrowly defined dogma. Free itself from the fear of the future. According to some interpretations, the future does not hold any promises; in fact, it only holds the promise of a dreadful and perpetual fall. Any form of innovation is condemned and a version of modernity - let us call it the Taliban model - holds to the belief that those who hold onto their ancestors - and dress and live like them - are the ones who will be saved in the afterlife. They will say to God: 'I lived amongst the irreligious people but I hung onto old pious people. I clung to them. And for that reason I will be saved.' Again, such narrow beliefs cannot accommodate modernity.

I: Do you think that the event in Tunisia in January 2011 has marked the beginning of a political, social and cultural promise made to the Arab world?

MT: Tunisia has opened a new chapter in the history of the Arab world, one that I culturally support. Arab is not a race but a cultural affiliation. 14th January is a day we will all remember. [5] It was the day Tunisia paved the way to the most fundamental political changes in modern Arab history, with new concepts but above all new aspirations and the sense that freedom had been denied to us for far too long. But I am not suggesting the Western imperialistic notion of freedom - the one that allows you to invade and declare war anywhere there is oil present. On the contrary, I would like to think that Arabs are now in a position to give voice to the deepest meaning of the word 'freedom' and negotiate it within an equation that includes justice. I believe that Arab thinkers have got an important mission in their hands. It is their duty to re-think freedom and the way it is interpreted by the West. Freedom in the context of egalitarianism, fairness and empathy is in my view the most important promise made by the Arab world today.

Interview conducted by Lina Lazaar on 10th April 2011.

[1] The hegira refers to the Muslim era reckoned from Muhammad's departure from Mecca in 622 AD.

[2] An *Ijtihad* is the making of a decision in Islamic law (*sharia*) by one's own personal effort (*jihad*) and above and beyond any *madhhab* of jurisprudence (*fiqh*). An *Ijtihad* stands in opposition to a *taqlid*, a form of copying or obeying without questioning.

[3] The *Ummah* is the whole community of Muslims bound together by ties of religion. It is effectively a spiritual community that unites Muslims in their attachment to Islam.



[4] For further discussion of this process see the Quran, 42: 32-39.

[5] 14 January 2011 was the day the then President, Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali, following a popular uprising, stepped aside after more than two decades in power in Tunisia.

About the author

Lina Lazaar is the Associate Editor of *Ibraaz*. She has an MA in Statistics, an MA in Art History and is a specialist at Sotheby's London in Post War and Contemporary Art. Her passion for Arab and Iranian Contemporary Art led Sotheby's to hold their first European auctions in this category in 2007. Since then she has curated these sales annually and significantly increased the international exposure and discussion of Middle Eastern contemporary art. Lina is a member of the Middle East North Africa Acquisitions Committee of Tate Modern, London. In 2011, she curated a collateral event of the 54th Venice biennial *The Future of a Promise*, the largest Pan-Arab contemporary art show in Venice.