

[TRANSLATED FROM QUOTIDIANO LIBERO (APRIL 18, 2004) BY DEANA N. AHMAD]

ASTROPHYSICIST AHMAD EXHIBITS HIS CONTROVERSIAL THEORIES ON THE ARABIC ORIGINS OF LIBERALISM.

## Long Live Capitalism. So Says Muhammad.

The analysis of a noted Palestinian intellectual: "The Qur'an is a hymn to the free entrepreneurial initiative, but Muslims have forgotten it."» by ANDREA COLOMBO

MILAN - Capitalism and Islam? Not only are they compatible, but the market economy was born under the dome of the mosques of Medina. Words of Imad-ad-Dean Ahmad, one of the few Arab intellectual friends of the West. Palestinian, born in 1948 aboard a ship that carried his parents to the United States, he has breathed the air of liberty since infancy. So much so, that once having grown up and become an astrophysicist, he thought to establish a think tank called the "Minaret of Freedom," in Bethesda, Maryland, a few kilometers from Washington D. C.

With long hair and the casual aspect of a professor used to the informal environment of university campuses, Ahmad does not hide his love for the homeland of all freedoms, America. He defines himself as ideologically near to the Republicans of Bush, but regarding human rights he thinks like the Democrats. "Liberal liberista and libertarian," just like our roots, he is convinced that liberal market and Islam go hand in hand. He positively supports that the word liberista was invented by Muhammad, and that the West actually learned it from the Qur'an. It is the fault of the current, ruling class Muslim, if the Arabic world has gotten itself stuck between bloodthirsty dictatorships and theocracies, says Ahmad.

Hosted in Milan, by the Istituto Bruno Leoni, for a conference entitled "Trade, not Aid: Globalization, Development and Freedom," he explained how the roots of liberalism run deeply between Mecca and Medina, the places where Muhammad began his preaching. "The founder of Islam," he said, "was a merchant. And he said that 'an honest merchant has a guaranteed place in paradise.' Our religion does not place limits on the accumulation of wealth, as long as it is spent well: for you, for the family, for your community." Nothing could be more distant from Christian pauperism. The ideal soil for the birth of a healthy capitalism.

Today however the situation has been reversed: the Arabic countries are extremely withdrawn, economically and politically, and the West is the world bearer of freedom. Ahmad, in Egypt, Syria, Saudi Arabia, would be put in prison for what he says. "Originally," he continues, "it was precisely the opposite. Europe was closed in its religious integration. The east signified tolerance."

... Ahmad explains that «a fundamental teaching of Islam is that every individual is responsible directly to Allah for his/her actions. No one can put oneself in the middle. Not the State, not the religious authority."

It is the same principle that, one thousand centuries later, was to be carried forward by Luther: individual responsibility will be the moral basis of capitalist practice (born in Holland and England of the Reform). "In the IX century," continues Ahmad, "there existed an organization, the supporters of reason and of justice, devoted to the 'good inner battle of the individual to understand Qur'anic law.'" Almost a libertarian jihad, which was made strong by the saying of the Prophet: "No coercion in religion." Later, some Islamic regimes developed extremely tolerant federalist systems, like the Ottoman Empire which, while Europe was persecuting the Jews, welcomed the Jewish community that escaped from the burning ghettos."

He is a full river, this Palestinian-American, tracing the fresco of the passage of ideas of freedom from East to West: "The enlightened Europeans, [Gottfried] Lessing and [John] Locke come to mind, learned from concepts like human rights from Islamic philosophy."

As often happens, it is the fault of the "foreigners" if all begins to go to ruin: "When the Mongols of Genghis Khan arrived, hierarchies were introduced, a centralized government. With the passage of time, Islamic countries sought to extend the power of the State, to the loss of the intermediate structures. Today we have inherited this state of things. But there are encouraging signs on the horizon. Like the Iraqi constitution approved by the provisory government: a model of a tolerant and federal Islamic Republic. It is quite wrong instead to base a government upon subsidies, like in Palestine, which are swallowed up by the corrupt managers of the PNA. Only an economy based on free trade between free peoples can guarantee peace and prosperity. Muslims therefore," concludes the Palestinian liberalista, "should return to their roots, instead of badly copying the West and being based on [foreign] assistance."

[Comments by Imad-ad-Dean Ahmad: I am a bit taken aback by the sweep of the statements attributed to me by this ebullient reporter. For the record: Whatever the Italian word liberista may mean, Muhammad, who spoke Arabic couldn't have possibly invented it. Perhaps our friend is thinking of Rose Wilder Lanes' claim, supported by my commentary in *Islam and the Discovery of Freedom*, that Muslims advanced the cause of liberty by establishing a world civilization predicated on the rule of law. I also wish to note that "the partisans of reason and justice," as the movement otherwise known as the Mu`tazila called themselves, was just one example of the numerous schools of thought devoted to independent critical thinking throughout most of Muslim history. Finally, I am not among those who blame the decline of the Muslim world on foreign aggression. Foreign aggression could only prevail because the Muslims themselves ignored their duty to engage in original critical thinking and depended on blind imitation of the past to guide them. The beauty of liberty is that it enables individuals and

communities to devise fresh responses to the challenges that confront them.]