

Prix national de la laïcité 2023: at the limits of claiming a cultural primacy

On December 9, France celebrates the Day of Secularism, constitutional pillar of the Republic, and on 8 November in Paris, the *Prix national de la laïcité* was presented to those who distinguished themselves in their professional life for having defended the values of secularism even at the cost of their own security. Among the winners, in fact, are the mayor of Montpellier, Michaël Delafosse, distinguished for his positions on the ban of the abaya and Professor Florence Bergeaud-Blacker, anthropologist author of critical studies, on some Islamic traditions, that Muslims consider offensive.

In a climate strongly shaken by the bloody attack of Hamas on 7 October, against the State of Israel, which sees the periodic but increasingly exponential rekindling of Islamophobic sentiment and, at the same time, of the never defeated anti-Semitism, echo the words spoken during the evening by the President of the Jury, the Iranian writer Abnousse Shalmani.

The heartfelt speech opens with the invitation to breathe the air of secularism as the only way to defend, console and reassure oneself in a context that is defined, with an expression with dangerously strong traits, “cultural world war”. A battle against the enemies of freedom that turns into a dangerous nationalistic exaltation of France and, at the same time, an attack on the tolerance of Europe and the whole West, against the degeneration of Islam, which is Islamism, defined as “a totalitarianism, which reduces men and women to being nothing more than agents of hatred and destruction”.

In defining themselves as belonging to the category of lay universalists, and the will not to betray the principles of humanism, President Shalmani attacks with contemptuous tones the Westerners who defend the members of the so-called “religion of the oppressed”, with the result, however, of justifying homophobia, misogyny and anti-Semitism only because they come from a non-Western culture. We must learn from the past but overcome it and remember that the West has abolished slavery and created human rights. If it is true that “a nation is... when it tolerates an intolerant religion”, as Elvetius, an eighteenth-century sensist and deist philosopher wrote about Catholicism, it is also necessary to highlight the risks of this new wave of tolerance that can prove fatal. The award speech concludes by praising French culture and knowledge that “broadly explains that Islam is a totalitarian”, in front of which you cannot linger in “odious laziness” and passive acceptance.

The closing invocations, full of pathos and clarifications on the policy of the speaker’s country of origin, namely Iran, invite to “be a little equal to the Iranians who at the cost of their lives defend themselves by challenging the obscurantism of the monarchy” and look to the future of Persia, entrusting to the International Criminal Court the judgment on the murderers of today, thanking the “sacred brilliant women who transmit in joy and intelligence the happiness of being free”. Wanting to summarize a first reflection on these words, it should be noted that they, crossing the limit of the idea of “*vivre ensemble*”, are placed, instead, in the framework of a worrying secularist attitude based on the idea of the superiority

of their culture, which conceives a dangerous hierarchy of values on the basis of which to force other cultures to adapt to their own. It is an ancient deviance, typically European, because it evokes that mistake of supremacy that produced the tragedy of the Holocaust. Moreover, for a world that has recognized the supremacy of law and delegated to international law the resolution of conflicts and the position of principles of coexistence that are superior to the same state norms, it represents the least scientific, because they are founded on the recognition of the superiority and inviolability of fundamental human rights.

Cristiana Maria Pettinato