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I will discuss the multicultural attitude of liberalism and its supposed crisis in the light of the problem as specified by the presence of Muslim minorities in Europe. The discussion will be kept within the limits of a political philosophical point of view. In Section 2, I will present an articulated conceptual framework concerning the treatment of Muslim minorities (actually I concentrate upon Arab minorities). I claim that from a normative point of view there is a convergent interest –if we assume a Muslim and a Western observer- to respect minimal liberal-democracy when multicultural problems are at stake. Muslims and Western observers can share this horizon.

Sharing this horizon is the consequence of a sort of “overlapping consensus” between the two observers here at stake. If however a limited overlapping consensus is the form in which we can imagine an Arab and a Western observer could agree on some basic principles of liberal-democracy, the content of their agreement must be defined in other terms. In the final part of Section 2 and in Section 3, I advance the hypothesis that this content can be understood in terms of “public reason”. To be more precise, I imagine two different conceptions of public reason, the first being weaker and the second stronger. This distinction is based on the nature of the consensus in the universes to which I am referring, the Arab and the Western. In both cases, public reason aims to reunite –only in limited areas when fundamental public issues are treated- citizens divided by different comprehensive doctrines. My interpretation says that this unifying role of public reason can be twofold, depending on how much of liberal-democratic rules of the game the citizens are supposed to hold in common. The older and firmer is the tradition and the respect of liberal-democracy, the stronger can be the consensual basis for public reason.

This is why there are differences when one takes in consideration the distinction between Western and Arab countries. In liberal-democratic Western polities it is usually possible to get a stronger background consensus on public reason, and consequently to advance more intense liberal-democratic claims than in the Arab polities. This is so because in the West pluralism is constitutionally defended in a more robust way.

This background framework –with the form of an overlapping consensus on a different amount of public reasons to share- is intended to show the way in which the qualification “multicultural” requires a preliminary liberal platform to be properly understood and applied. In particular, I identify three levels of liberal-democracy: level 1 concerns minimal liberal-democracy; level 2 Western like liberal-democracy; level 3 pluralism. Arabs and Westerners are supposed to share an interest, in conditions of overlapping consensus, for keeping alive level 1, whereas Westerners defend level 2 in which background public reason can be stronger. Level 3, namely pluralism, depends on levels 1 and 2.

The supposed crisis of multiculturalism seems to depend on the fact that multiculturalism itself can weaken the defence of these levels of liberal-democracy. To put it bluntly, many Arabs think that they cannot even speak of minorities and multiculturalism until when they would have got level 1. Even a relatively weak convergence on public reason seems problematic for them living in situations in which often liberal-democratic citizenship is denied. Public reason exists to defend pluralism, and pluralism is somehow incompatible with a collectivist view of Muslim *umma*. Westerners instead are afraid that by conceding too much to the claims of minorities and to multiculturalism –in particular if these minorities are inspired by Muslim comprehensive doctrines- they can jeopardize their level 2 of liberal-democracy. Their strong consensus on basic public reason can be jeopardized. According to this opinion, Muslim political culture, being sometimes substantially pre-modern, does not permit the flourishing of a robust public reason¹. Previous equilibrium points, like liberal multiculturalism, do not seem, to the eyes of many Westerners, adequate to protect from these perceived risks.

In Section 3, the idea of a “multicultural liberalism” is analysed and defended contrasting it with “liberal multiculturalism”-. In the first part of the Section, I give a comparative quasi-semantic definition of the terms “liberalism” and “multiculturalism” highlighting the differences between the two notions. This taxonomy permits to make

¹ Of course, this Western view is reinforced by Islamic radicals like the Egyptian Al Qutb and the Pakistani Mawdudi

sense of the best attempt to reconcile the terms which is probably the one provided by Will Kymlicka that I label here “liberal multiculturalism” (LM). Then I try to examine in the light of some well known criticisms to LM the main responses by the advocates of LM. In the concluding remarks, I note that some perplexities for what concerns LM are still present and I propose an alternative view, labelled here multicultural-liberalism or ML, where the emphasis evidently is on the necessary priority of liberal-democracy to get sound multiculturalism. This conclusion seems coherent with what is said in Section 2. In other words, the supposed crisis of multiculturalism has a lot to do with the difficult relationships between Arabs and Westerners in particular in Europe. Their reciprocal concerns however –if properly investigated- do not focus on cultural difference in itself but rather on a kind of liberal-democratic deficit that both Arabs and Westerners perceive behind their respective institutional structures. This deficit can be analysed in terms of a weakening of the background consensus on public reason when multiculturalism is not opportunely qualified –a public reason which is stronger in the West than in the Muslim world- in both kinds of societies.