

A collective prayer in a public place infringes the principle of secularism?

The sermon delivered by Imam Brahim Baya on May 17 at the Polytechnic University of Turin has sparked a lively debate on the compatibility of collective prayers in public places with the principle of secularism.

It should be clarified that the prayer session was organized by student movements occupying university spaces for weeks, without any active role from the university's governance. For this reason, the critique related to the defense of the principle of secularism acquires a different weight compared to another, perhaps more significant issue: the relationship between the protection of religious freedom and the opposition to religious language that, besides fueling conflicts, might also contain forms of incitement to hatred. Specifically, the prayer, which certainly does not represent a violation of others' religious sentiments, was accompanied by a brief political discourse where, after a mention of the relevance of jihad, a "liberation struggle that began the moment the Zionists trampled on that blessed land" was discussed.

The debate also included the issue of the lack of specific spaces for worship within some Italian universities, as stated by Imam Baya to the press.

In general terms, the critique has focused on the relationship between the "moment of prayer" and the "institutional place," and various media interventions have shown a kind of unanimous interpretation regarding a specific idea of secularism: that of a neutralizing secularism which requires the total exclusion of any expression of religious faith in public places. This notion should be distinguished from that indicated by the Italian Constitutional Court, which is open to the possibilities of external manifestation of religious sentiment, provided it is done in a pluralistic and egalitarian manner.

It is true that secularism must be balanced with other interests and various needs, but the possibility of providing spaces for prayer and meditation within universities could respond to a principle of secularism consistent with the pluralistic values recognized in the constitutional charter.

On the other hand, contextualizing the episode might contribute to the relativization of the alleged violation of the principle of secularism, if this principle is understood in its sense of protecting the pluralism of values and religious freedom. While violent language certainly nullifies the attempt to frame the debate within the principles of religious freedom and secularism, envisioning a model of intercultural secularism that also materializes in the creation of places for

worship within universities becomes a valid counterpoint to the neutralizing conceptions of religious dimensions in institutional places.

Indeed, it is not the prayer itself that generates an incompatibility with the principle of secularism, but its “instrumental” and “politicized” use. A moment of prayer devoid of incitement to hatred and “political rhetoric,” which involved the active participation of other religious denominations, would probably demonstrate the application of an inclusive secularism that simultaneously respects the expression of religious freedom.

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