Islam: Waiting for Post-Islamism

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The transformations of Islam's practices and discourse in the late 1990s have led some observers to invent the post-Islamism category. Supposed to designate a new ideological age on Islam land, this category sends back to a series of logics and players that disavow the initial Islamism project (and in particular the construction of an Islamic State). The rise of new Muslim intellectuals, favored by the development of communication tools, and the appearance of discourses praising the individual success or values of market economy, would thus mark the decline of Islamism in favor of new, and more subtle forms of societies' Islamization.

That these phenomena—unexpected hybridizations brought about, among others, by globalization—exist is not doubtful. But that the post-Islamism category may account for the entire current religious and political configurations in the Muslim world has on the other hand nothing certain. Its generality risks particularly masking the complexity and mostly the ambivalence of the number of procedures at work in Muslim societies.

From Islamism to Post-Islamism

Since its emergence in the 1930s, or its reemergence in the 1970s—those who took Nasser, Bourguiba or Boumediene for "secularists" did not perceive anymore—, that political Islam has gone by, in the vision of observers in Europe or the United States by three "phases" in the midst of whom one can identify both *pseudo* and *quasi* paradigms, structuring the analysis grid, independently of positions (sympathetic or hostile) adopted by said observers in relation to the phenomenon itself.

One would have at first attended the "return" or the "reawakening" *(sahwa)* of Islam: actors manifested, since the mid-1970s, reviving the observation (drawn up by Hasan al-Banna in the 1920s, afterwards radicalized by Sayyid Qutb in the 1960s) according to which it would be no longer possible to live as a good Muslim in society. From this observation, they draw political and/or social programs where they enter into conflict with the State/the political power. Some will see in this process the effect of a "return of the frustrated" in contexts marked by the defeat of developmental projects, of nationalist inspiration and by a generalized legitimacy[1] crisis. Others (sometimes themselves) underscore the rise of economic and political exclusions striking sectors more and more numerous and educated in society, effect of deregulation policies in which regimes in power are engaged.

In both cases, these processes would command phenomena of *conversion* in the contexts where Islamic religious

reference appears as the last source of legitimacy and, simultaneously, of contestation—the only language in which the elites in place or protesters might further hope to make themselves understood by the masses. Gilles Kepel has undertaken to deliver *ex post* what seems to him to be the "formula" for this moment: the Islamic contestation of regimes in power would only result in their overthrow and the establishment of an "Islamic" power where an alliance would be successful in tying and maintaining itself between "pious bourgeoisies," "poor urban youth" and "Muslim intellectuals," this could only occur in Khomeynist Iran, in lesser degree in Sudan where Islamism serve as a smokescreen to a northern military dictatorship, and, in caricature, in the Afghanistan of Talibans.[2]

In the early 1990s, a second phase begins: "the defeat of political Islam," or even "decline of Islamism" would be the order of the day. A double defeat, in fact: the one of Muslims reproducing somewhere else the Iranian "model," as in Egypt or Algeria where armed conflict with the regimes in power turns into advantage of those supported by Westerners, scared by the threat of contagion in vital regions to their interests, particularly concerning energy. And mainly a defeat to give rise to an "Islamic" political formula linking religion and politics and liable to present an alternative to nationalism and theocratic feudalities in power in the Arabian Peninsula, Saudi Arabia at the top. Olivier Roy was one of the first ones to record, in 1992, what seemed to him to be the symptoms of disillusion in the very bosom of Iranian

bastion, where men of religion and intellectuals, previously won over by the cause of Islamic revolution, came to "denounce this association between Islam and politics that illegitimates, in the long run, the first, all in making serene exercise of the second impossible."[3] It is G. Kepel who, once again, stated here the most optimistic hypothesis, or the most consensual, anticipating the beginning of a new age,

> with the twenty first century [which] will see undoubtedly the Muslim world going into straight forward modernity, according to unheard fusion modes with the western universe—particularly by the expedient of emigration and their effect, the telecommunications and information revolution.[4]

Soluble Islamism in the markets, the Internet and democracy…

It is remarkable that, in a third phase, the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks did not fundamentally return in question the hypothesis of "post-Islamism"[5] which has seemed to be the French contribution to this debate since the late 1990s, in the field that I refer to as the one of "neo-orientalism,"[6] based on this observation of defeat. On the one hand, in the logic of its globalization and dislocation of its operations, jihadism seems to be, a little paradoxically, an extreme post-Islamism manifestation, breaking off from what had constituted the very objective of Islamism *stricto sensu*, namely, the overthrow and construction of the Islamic State. The political offshoots of' Al-Qaida and its emulators would have in return for effect, a little everywhere, to

stimulate Islamic groups to try to obtain from the States in Power their political normalization, by solemnly disowning violence, accepting pluralism and presenting themselves as the warmest partisans of the democratic game. On the other hand, often in the laudable intention of preventing the merger between "Islam" and its most "repulsive" manifestations in the eyes of western opinions, certain observers are from now on mindful of the emergence of new manifestations of "how can one be a Muslim?"[7] The findings here are unanimous: The rise of a "post-Islamism" does not mean in any way that concerned societies or players would give up wanting to be Muslims. Better: it does not translate a reflux of imaginary social-politics built on referent Islamic religious. As O. Roy remarks, "the political Islamism reflux is accompanied by the advance of Islam as a social phenomenon."[8]

The Faces of Post-Islamism

By schematizing, three records are most often invoked and documented to account for the ways and issues of the emergence of players and logics identified as "post-Islamic."

We refer at first to the appearance of "new Muslim intellectuals."[9] After Christianity and Judaism, Islam's turn would finally come to be submitted to *interiorly* albeit still in a marginal manner, to human and social sciences investigation methods: implementation of new hermeneutics based

on critical approaches of sacred texts, particularly the Koran itself; revival of the personal interpretation effort (*ijtihâd*); placement of the "models" in historical perspective, particularly political models (caliphate, imamat, jihad…), inherited from Pious Ancestors… With for effect a relativization of the religious law centrality (*sharî'a*) to the benefit of cultural dimensions of belonging to Islam, the rehabilitation of religious pluralism, an opening to the problematic of Human's rights and establishing necessary conditions for the revival of a true inter-religions dialog.

We underscore next the emergence of new action records and systems, particularly in the economic and social spheres: globalization of markets and exchanges, including university exchanges, would have favored consolidation of new social economies, mobilizing the virtues of "good management," restoring also personal success and individual enrichment, maybe even the consumerism, when these would be "purified" by the respect of rules of an economic moral reputed to me Muslim, rejecting monopolization and enrichment without cause (*riba,* incorrectly translated as "usury")—but no capitalist exploitation of labor.[10] Social economies that would equally render possible consolidation of new modes of mobilization and action of "Islamic civilian societies," more and more independent in relation to the States and linked to transnational information and communication networks.

Finally, one rests on the emergence of new legal and ethical standards: reaffirmation of categorical imperative of

respect to religious commands, more than ever, socially expected from one end to the other of the Muslim sense universe, on one hand would tend to be accompanied by a narrowing of their field of application, and on the other hand, would be offset by giving rise to individual assertion and right to separation from the public sphere and private sphere in religious matter. The vigorous self-assertion of an "Islamic feminism," both in Muslim societies themselves and in the midst of Muslim communities in Europe or the United States, is what gives rise, in the most visible manner, to this regulatory and ethical renewal, noticed by several western feminist movements during the French debate concerning the veil.

The Limits of a Category

The abuse of foregoing conditional and quotation marks in the text didn't seek to question the very existence of original manifestations, often deeply innovative, of "how can one be a Muslim?": the "new Muslim intellectuals" exist, one can meet them, as well as the "Islamic feminists;" in Turkey or somewhere else—even in Iran, including by electing a "radical" president to succeed reformist Mr. Khatami[11]—, political forces exploit the paths of a "Muslim democracy," like one speaks about "Christian democracy," and companies like *Mekka Cola* have undertaken to apply the most sophisticated marketing techniques to the promotion of explicitly communal consumerism.

It would rather be about pointing out what would seem to me like the fundamental ambiguity and the limits of the "post-Islamism" category, ambiguities and limits that it shares anyway with other, likewise articulated—post-modernism, post-communism, post-Nation-State… Egyptian political scientist Diaa Rashwan, among others, emphasizes the fact that those who mobilize this kind of categories

> suggest, implicitly or explicitly, that certain phenomena [characteristics of a world they believe began to disappear a decade ago] perpetuate themselves however with the end of the "old" world, without bringing to light accurate outlines of the new world that has supplanted this.[12]

Without going, like him, even into seeing a characterized illustration of *wishful thinking*, one can identify, in the records and even the lands where the post-Islamic hypothesis partisans see the most evidential manifestations of the Islamism reflux, a certain number of liable indications to put the scope into context.

First of all, the "new Muslim intellectuals" exist. They are characterized even all the same time by the great diversity of their origins[13] and remarkable convergence of their measure. Their daring leads some observers to see in the period that is opining "a period of as deep changes to the Muslim world as the ones determined by the protestant Reformation were to Christianity."[14] This new age would be marked by a "reintellectualization" of Islam made possible by the new means of communication, Internet and satellite, which gave rise to a class of "micro-intellectuals" having

the widest access to global Muslim community. No doubt. But, however, a good number among them have been compelled to exile—such as Iranian Abdulkarim Soroush, South African Farid Esack, Egyptian Nasr Abou Zayd or Sudanese Abdulahi Al-Na'im, who work henceforth at European or U.S. institutions and essentially express themselves in English, main debate language, which they host. In most cases, what drives them into exile, is the rise to power and body of oulemans, in favor of confrontation between Islamite and the powers in place, of which they have taken advantage to gain an growing independence and to exercise an ever growing supercilious censorship over the entire intellectual and artistic production. We can then ask ourselves, undoubtedly forcing somewhat the quality, if the main interlocutors of these new Muslim intellectuals are not the (western) observers who recognize them as such.

Next, favoring the emergence of what O. Roy or D. Eickelman name as a de-territorialized "virtual *Umma*," no one doubts that the Internet would have contributed to a perception globalization of problems put forth by the interactions between "Islam" and "modernity." One only has to visit the countless sites dedicated to the promotion of a "XXI century Islam" to note what is presented as a meaning flow reversal: whereas standards in force in Muslim societies (in their "origin societies") were supposed, if not impose, at least to serve as models to "emigrated" Muslim communities, which are henceforth, the Internet helping, more and more often specific problems faced by these populations—those related to their interactions with "moder-

nity"—who tend to guide regulatory production, *including in societies with Muslim majority.* Production of behavioral models at the same time "Muslim" and "modern" is thereby explicitly the objective of a militant Tariq Ramadan for the cause of an "European Islam" conceived as the laboratory of an *aggiornamento* of the Prophet's religion. The problem here is of vicissitudes to which Muslim communities are opposed in the different contexts where they are installed, about which there would not be a question of stopping here, but that do not fail to influence in return over the pending reformulations of Islamic movements in Muslim countries, as well shown by the Islamic veil affair in France.

Last but not least*,* it seems to be confirmed that one of the most decisive evolutions initiated in the course of the last years concerns numerous militants' abandon of the Islamic State construction problematic, along with the refluxes of *sharî'a* related application claims, but the abandon of these objectives has for counterpart the ever more pressing claim of those groups to a formal participation in the political scenario on explicitly community-minded bases. With the risk of confusing limits between morals and politics and between a public sphere and private sphere where minorities of all types risk to pay the price, as we have been able to verify, for example, at the time of the wave of persecution that hit Egyptian homosexuals in 2001, pushed by authorities, no doubt, concerned with giving pious opinion security.

Produced by western observers—as, in its time the one of "Islamism"—the "post-Islamism" category, risks well,

ultimately, presenting the same insufficiencies and being exposed to the same approaches as that one. Now and retrospectively, the greatest weakness of Islamism categories in Muslim societies has been, in my opinion, of widely confounding the problems put forth in Muslim societies of this last quarter century—demographic, rural exodus, education, social injustice problems, political deadlocks…—and languages used by the players in attendance to announce the stakes, all in relating these languages to a "truth of Islam," unmovable and global, horizon susceptible sense to transpose itself from one end to the other of Muslim World. With for effect, on the other hand, to make difficult to think interactions between different player categories demanding a religious referee—oulemas, State apparatus or dynasties, properly Islamic—when even the unity of this scene or this movement is found postulated; and, on the other hand, to reduce the analysis of contemporary Muslim societies to the one of discourses and practices of their most radical components, if not the most marginal ones. If we do not beware, approaches in terms of "post-Islamism" hold the same risk, somehow inverted: the one accompanying back the culturalist truism constituting orientalism and its "neo" avatars, of an irreducible Muslim exception.

Notes

1. For example, François Burgat, *L'islamisme en face*, Paris, La Découverte, 1995; Michael Hudson, *Arab politics, the search for legitimacy*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1977.

2. G. Kepel, *Jihad. Jihad. Expansion et déclin de l'islamisme*, Paris, Gallimard, 2000. Paradoxically, countries like Pakistan, Morocco or Saudi Arabia seem to observes, this first moment, not to be concerned with these phenomena: Islam would not have to "wake up" as it is always already in the foundation of political order. These countries would thereby be, at least for some time, sheltered from Islamic "contagion" of which it was beginning to be informed that it was in the process of acquiring Muslim regions reputed to be "peripheral"—Central Asia, Balkans, China, India…—or even, in the underground, European metropolitan suburbs.

3. O. Roy and F. Khosrokhavar, *Iran: comment sortir d'une révolution religieuse*, Paris, Seuil, May 1999.

4. G. Kepel, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

5. For example, "Le post-islamisme," *Revue des Mondes musulmans et de la Méditerranée*, n. 85-6, March 1999, coordinated by O. Roy and Patrick Haenni.

6. A. Roussillon, "Les islamologues dans l'impasse," *Esprit*, 8-9, August-September 2001. The question here would not be of those who, on one side and the other of the Atlantic, see in Islam a convenient adversary in replacement of communism, against which to assert the superiority of the West in a more or less explicit logic of "chock of civilizations."

7. For example, John Esposito and F. Burgat (eds.), *Modernizing islam: religion in the public sphere in the Middle East and Europe*, New Brunswig, Rutgers University Press, 2003.

8. O. Roy, *op. cit.*, p. 105.

9. Abdou Filali-Ansary, *Réformer l'islam?*, Paris, La Découverte, 2003; Rachid Benzine, *Les nouveaux penseurs de l'islam*, Paris, Albin Michel, 2004; Farish Noor, *New voices of Islam*, Leiden, ISIM, 2002; J. Esposito and J. Voll, *Makers of Contemporary Islam*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2001.

10. For example, Patrick Haenni, *L'islam de marché, l'autre révolution conservatri*ce, Paris, Seuil, 2005.

11. After all—and if we do the part of control of candidacies exercised by the Revolutionary Guard Council runned by Ali Khamenei,

Ayatollah Khomeyni's heir—the presidential polling unrolled under remarkably "democratic" conditions, if we hold into the correctness of voting operation, the elected candidate is unquestionably the one chosen by the majority of the electoral body.

12. Diaa Rashwan, "Wishful thinking, present and future," *Al-Ahram Weekly*, 572, 7-13 February 2002.

13. A. Roussillon, *La pensée islamique contemporaine. Acteurs et enjeux*, Paris, Téraèdre, 2005.

14. Dale Eickelman, "Inside the Islamic Reformation", *Wilson Quarterly* 22, n. 1, Winter 1998, p. 82.