

New Ways to "Believe" in a Global Context

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Abstract

The contexts of Islam and the globalizing aspect of jihadism can only be understood within the framework of globality. These contexts, which are not exempted from the crises stemming from modernity and from the disenchantment of the world, are confronted to an escalation of interactions on a global scale. This results in changes in the modes of "believing" and in a new relation to Islam. This article aims at precisely describing these dynamics, analyzing the doctrinal system that harbors fundamentalism, structures a dichotomous vision of the world or, to the extreme, establishes the Jihad as a sacred prescription. The emphasis is placed on the psychological motives of the most radical movement.

Keywords: Islam; Transcendence; Fundamentalism; Radicalization; Jihadism

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Introduction

The contexts of Islam, its current inner conflicts and the globalizing aspect of terrorism can only be understood within the framework of globality. The increase of interactions with the outside world, migrations and the circulation of ideas create a situation of cosmopolitanism. Ideas infiltrate local cultures and produce significant mutations which continue through the reorganizations, the redefinitions of the various fields of a religion and a modification of its core dogmas. As a consequence, we see changes in the way one belongs to a religion, based on a new relation to dogmas and a redefinition of what is "fundamental".

Islam: the Spirit of the Text

In this context, the relation to the dogmas of Islam and the modes of "believing" cannot be understood without some additional clarifications.

From a philosophical point of view, Judaism, Christianity and Islam share many common views. The father of monotheism, Abraham, is for Muslims one of the five great prophets with Noah, Moses, Jesus and Mohammad. Each of these three religions is prophetic in that it is supported by an exceptional character, a visionary, a paradigmatic personality who reforms morality [1]. The universalism of these three "revealed" religions stems from the fact that they invoke the "Creator" in the same way and call for the same transcendence. The demands defining the modes of "believing" are of the same kind: a hermeneutic activity to understand what is behind the literal message, an interpretation

theory and a series of rules allowing to determine both the literal meaning of what is Written and the existential meaning (exegesis). By claiming to be the sole way to "salvation", each of them demands exclusivity. This characteristic is precisely what made them proselytic¹, intolerant to other beliefs. This also led in the past to a "clash of truths" and to successive religious wars.

Two fundamental aspects separate these religions. From an ideological point of view, Islam deems itself to be the seal of revealed religions, the conclusion and synthesis of the universal Revelation. Contrary to the Bible and the Gospels, Quran as a revelation is the basis of the Muslim doctrine. Its content is a transmission from Allah to whom He has elected as His messenger through Gabriel.

Islamism is not Islam

Practices in Islam are varied, complex. While expanding, this religion has adapted to the anthropological foundation of the societies it has penetrated, by appropriating traditions and local rites, by absorbing pre-Islamic animistic practices.

In Islam the most rigorist is the Salafi movement. It advocates a literal interpretation of the founding texts of Islam. It is all based on an obsession with returning to the original purity of the ummah. The elimination of what is considered exogenous to Islam from the scope of religious practices is an essential preoccupation. It is obviously only an illusion since everywhere Islam is marked with acculturation, crises and identity reconstructions.

This movement is nonetheless shape-shifting on account of theological divergences and internal polemics. It is divided up

¹This characteristic does not bear on contemporary Judaism.

between a simply quietist movement, rejecting all politicization, and an ideologised movement which can go as far as justifying violence.

For the latter, encouraging to "return to the faith of the ancestors" aims to ideologize religion. Its matrix is made of justifications, references and myths borrowed from an ancient religious history which maintains elation and claims that the jihad is a sacred prescription. Its militants have taken a path of fascination for the origins and overvaluing religion [2].

Political Islam aims at establishing a community based on preaching thanks to a transnational brotherhood of religious essence: the *oumma*. It acts against a backdrop of internal identity crisis. The avowed war goals first target Muslim states that are reproached with infidelity to what is considered authentic Islam. This path maintains a dichotomous vision of the world, refers to the persistence of post-colonial relations and then targets nations said to be impious or imperialist.

Shared Civilizational Crises or Religious Wars?

On a global scale, the encounter of singular local spheres causes troubled interactions. From some points of view, the principal cause of terrorism is not globalisation itself but the fact that some categories or parts of the world are excluded from its resultant benefits. The growing idea is that the two phenomena cannot be separated since terrorism is a cause and a consequence per se [3].

Fundamentalisms and identitarian closures can then be seen as the development of deeper crises, the paradoxes of the contemporary religious arena [4]. Dragged into modernity, the Muslim world is not exempted from crises stemming from decolonization, and from the disenchantment of the world. By analyzing within their context the founding principles of the "contemporary Arab consciousness" since the onset of independences and by describing the relation to modernity [5] had observed that in the eyes of the West, the East is not a participant but a variable of international relations. He found out that, to the Arab consciousness, the "West" is the "eternal alterity". In fact, throughout the 20th century, the Arab contexts had been commanded to take a stance regarding political systems, of any kind whatsoever. Today, while religion is still ubiquitous, despite a series of ideological revolutions, the command is now to take a stance about Islam. This ensemble of elements can only explain the systematic coupling West/East, aiming to make believe that what is currently at stake is only the confrontation of two civilizations [6].

In fact, a more open world which encourages more interactions will likely lead to an escalation of inequalities. In this context, any interference² can only intensify conflicts, even terrorism. This is demonstrated by Papy [7]. This author has analysed an exhaustive database of the suicide attacks which happened in the world during two decades (1980-2003) and which were mentioned by various media globally. The data shows that the

²In his analysis, Papy (2016) refers to the presence of the US troops in the Persian Gulf as a pivotal factor leading to the 9/11 attacks.

link between the suicide attacks and religious fundamentalism is not automatic. It also shows that the suicidal act in itself, added to the attack, aims to suggest other potential attacks in a context where the perpetrators show themselves to be determined. Furthermore, according to Olivier Roy [8], the expansion of radical Islamism concurs with the deconstruction of traditional societies and the reconstruction of imaginary communities based on the individual. In the West, this process has a consequence: the separation of religion from the other symbolic spheres, which leads to the "neo-ethnicization of Muslims" and the reconstruction of a group using indicators selected by the logic of the countries of immigration. In this case, Islam is deemed a rebellion, and becomes a symbol of freedom or a method to reverse the stigma. Whether immigrants or French persons with an immigrant background, their vulnerable position makes them sympathize with the ideality emanating from the radical religious message. The frustrations and feelings of injustice inherent to their position encourage them to draw from the religious discourse, to contest the world order—and to regain pride. Their social position incites contestation—the messages addressed to them contain illusions of revenge, redemption, dignity, and absolute equality beyond death.

However let's not be mistaken on the meaning of the multiple forms of attachment to Islam. Not all visible religiosities represent a puristic or original Islam. In France as well as in other Western societies, a pietistic and pacified religious practice exists. In the name of their family history, Muslims simply refuse to give up one of their two groups of identity references and claim their religious values. Those who in the name of family history and identity coherence claim to be part of a pietistic Islam, prove there is no incompatibility between their religion and their citizenship. They have adopted a double model, a double perspective: the one of the family values rooted in a Muslim substrate more or less pregnant but never disavowed, and the one of the outside world, assimilated to a pontificator, an expansionist modernity [9]. While the West dominates globality and rejects spirituality for the most part, to claim freedom in one's relation to "believing" is to defend oneself against all risks of losing self-worth. When Western culture is prone to regard exiting religion as what should be the fate of humanity, some Muslims seek to meet a real need for transcendence by questioning the dogmas of their religion. The search for a resort to compensate for the devoid of sense produced by the difficulties to integrate society can also be fulfilled by a spiritual journey. This resort coincides with a "place of elective affinity and of re-creation of the social ties" [10]. Here or there, now and then, the search for a meaning to life can be found in the formalism of religious tradition and ritualism, or to the extreme in hyper-rationality.

Jihadism in Globality

By various ways, the transnational dimension declared by the Islamism structured around armed actions is attractive to some young people. A real harmony between their subjective space and the diverse modes of virtual communication facilitates their enrolment. It is why the jihadist networks have improved their means of communication on the Internet, with the goal to give the illusion of a subjective encounter. The discourse that

radicalizes entails a death oath while promising a reunion in the afterlife. To maintain the myth of sacrifice and encourage suicide attacks, this discourse uses specific symbolism and a set of rituals in order to compensate the "loss" which results from death.

Everything points to a structural relation between "the subjective world of Islamists" and "the objective facts from the Quranic text" [11]. In its modes of recruitment, especially with young people and immigrants, the radical Islamist movement systematically uses quotes from the Quran and references to the life of the Prophet. Moreover, the structure of the religious message excludes the possibility for a debate or a controversy. This movement "plays" and "plays again" the submission to God. Obedience to His Messenger institutes the Jihad as a weapon of political Islam.

Historic examples (Egypt, Algeria, Afghanistan... Syria) show that when religious arguments and persuasion are paired, there is higher chance to convince and radicalize. These mechanisms have indeed been implemented in many religiously obedient protest movements to overthrow secular states, leaders who were submissive to Western powers, a despot, a unique party or even against populations considered acculturated, enfeoffed to Western ideals, and more simply to impose a more scrupulously orthodox practice of Islam.

The fact remains that Islam does not formally prescribe the Jihad. Certainly, references to this notion exist in the Quran but the exegete tradition does not interpret it unequivocally. Interpretations vary between a personal effort to elevate one's faith and adapt to the transformations of the world, and an obligation to combat, nay a perpetual war against the apostates. The controversy on the reality of an incitement to the Jihad in Islam hence stems from a difference in interpretation. It also ensues from the difference in relation to religious history for the reference to the Jihad is coupled with the notion of *sulh*, which

means conciliation or truce [12].

Conclusion

We cannot obscure the plurality which exists in Islam. There are multiple ways to live this religion, to interpret its texts or to carry the memory attached to it. Ingrained in a diversity of cultural contexts and supported by several diasporas, Islam is located at the junction of the collective and the intimate. The events of the past decade show that despite extremisms, Islam has entered the existential phase of its history [13]. These events must be interpreted in the light of a history that is not only internal to the divers Muslim states, but also that involves international relations.

Despite crises and the effects of a "deviant" orthodoxy, an alternative is on the rise [14]. Some Muslims have taken the path of a non-violent transcendental tradition, a mystical tradition which advocates for a "Path to God" that is strictly individual. This other path advocates for an Islam devoid of submission, enlightened by reflection, intuition and meditation. An Islam of spirituality, secularized, because adapted to the possibilities of the present [15]. After going through centuries and different States, this tradition formed into different "mystical orders" or "friaries". The latter offer an initiation to a religious practice cleared of any ideology, and otherwise compatible with the demands of secularity. This branch of Islam remains nonetheless in minority. It is supported by mystics largely referencing an entire chain of "masters" spread out between the East and the Maghreb, including Ibn Arabi³, a universal figure in mysticism.

In France, as well as among immigrants, the slow elaboration of identity coherences which leads to integration inevitably produces diverse forms of religious reappropriation. Not all religiosities, visible or declared, represent a purist or original Islam and, eventually, the belief and sense of national belonging come apart, whereas cultural or ethnic specificities fade.

³Ibn Arabi, Arab Andalusian metaphysicist in the 13th century. Pivot of Islam metaphysics and theorist of the esoteric doctrine of the Unicity of Being.

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